

# Selling European Democracy

## The European Parliament's Communication Strategy on Facebook

Svenja K. Scholz

University of Helsinki

Faculty of Social Sciences

Media and communication studies

Master's thesis

March 2019



HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO  
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty

Faculty of Social Sciences

Laitos – Institution – Department

Tekijä – Författare – Author

Svenja Katharina Scholz

Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title

Selling European Democracy: The European Parliament's Communication Strategy on Facebook

Oppiaine – Läroämne – Subject

Media and communication studies

Työn laji – Arbetets art – Level

Master's thesis

Aika – Datum – Month and year

March 2019

Sivumäärä – Sidoantal – Number of pages

113

Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

After the all-time low voter turnout in the European elections in 2014, the European Parliament faces its legitimacy being undermined. While the mass media is often made responsible for being a major contributor to the lack of an active political European public sphere where the EU governance can be debated, social media has been considered as a means to connect the European institutions and its citizens through direct communication. From the viewpoint of deliberative democratic theory, the European Parliament can restore legitimacy through engaging citizens in public deliberation and involving them in the European decision-making process. At the same time, political institutions are known for their attempts to generate legitimacy in social media through promotional campaigns that do not stipulate policy impact.

This study contributes to the debate about the European public sphere by exploring the motivations behind the European Parliament's institutional communication on the social networking site Facebook. Its theoretical underpinning hence links together the debates about the EU's democratic deficit on the one hand, and the democratic potential of social media on the other. Specifically, this research scrutinises how the members of the European Parliament's Web Communication unit make sense of their work practices on Facebook and which role they ascribe to themselves and other actors in the construction of a European public sphere. The goal is to offer a critical assessment of the European Parliament's Facebook communication against the backdrop of the normative framework derived from the deliberative theory of public sphere.

The qualitative research is based on two data sets: The first data set was collected through participant observation in the European Parliament's Web Communication unit in February 2018; the second one through eight semi-structured interviews with the Unit's communication officials working with Facebook. Based on positioning theory, an interpretative interview analysis is conducted.

The findings assert that the European Parliament's Facebook communication must be understood as a political, top-down, promotional campaign rather than an attempt to engage ordinary citizens in an online deliberation. Thus, it does not provide for a systematic political bottom-up policy impact. The findings hence support the view that the narrative of social media connecting political actors and the citizens is most of all put forward to legitimise political promotion. This study moreover emphasises a liberal representative understanding rather than a deliberative understanding of European democracy within the European Parliament's administration. Accordingly, the role of the European Parliament web communication officials in the European public sphere is to substitute the weak media coverage about the Parliament and raise awareness about its benefits to the voters.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords

European public sphere, deliberative democracy, European Parliament, Facebook, political PR, promotional cultures

## Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. The European Public Sphere.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2.1. The European Union's democratic deficit from a deliberative perspective .....</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1.1. The deliberative model of democratic public sphere.....	6
2.1.2. The deliberative network approach.....	8
<b>2.2. Theories of the European public sphere .....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.2.1. Model 1: The pan-European public sphere.....	10
2.2.2. Model 2: The Europeanisation model.....	10
2.2.3. Model 3: The network model of the European public sphere.....	14
<b>3. Social media and European democracy .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3.1. The democratic potential of social media.....</b>	<b>17</b>
3.1.1. Power in social media .....	18
3.1.2. Equality in social media.....	20
3.1.3. Information in social media .....	21
3.1.4. Political participation in social media.....	22
3.1.5. Deliberation in social media .....	24
3.1.6. Discussion: A differentiated view on social media .....	25
<b>3.2. Political promotion in social media.....</b>	<b>26</b>
3.2.1. Promotional culture in the political sphere.....	27
3.2.2. Institutional promotion in social media .....	28
<b>3.3. The European Parliament in social media.....</b>	<b>31</b>
3.3.1. The European Parliament's communication challenges .....	33
3.3.2. Findings on the European Parliament's institutional communication.....	34
3.3.3. Discussion: Deliberation or promotion? .....	37
<b>4. Methods.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>4.1. Research design .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>4.2. Data collection .....</b>	<b>41</b>
4.2.1. Data set 1: Participant observation .....	42
4.2.2. Data set 2: Semi-structured interviews .....	43
<b>4.3. Data analysis .....</b>	<b>45</b>
4.3.1. Positioning theory as a social constructionist theory.....	45
4.3.2. Positioning theory's analytical tool in communication .....	46
4.3.3. Application of the method .....	49
<b>4.4. Validity, ethics and reflections .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>5. Analysis.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>5.1. Positioning analysis .....</b>	<b>53</b>
5.1.1. The European Parliament – a democratic change agent .....	54
5.1.2. The citizens – the uninformed authority .....	55
5.1.3. The media – elitist and old-fashioned.....	57
5.1.4. Public speakers – bullies, opportunists and competitors .....	59
5.1.5. Facebook – powerful and useful.....	60
5.1.6. The Facebook Team – civil servants and communication experts .....	67
5.1.7. Desired position – a publicly acknowledged European Parliament .....	70
<b>5.2. Speech act analysis .....</b>	<b>71</b>
5.2.1. “Being where the people are” .....	71
5.2.2. “Informing the citizens”.....	73
5.2.3. “Calling for action” .....	74

5.2.4.	“Offering a two-way communication channel” .....	76
5.2.5.	“Answering comments” .....	78
5.2.6.	“Being a bridge to the politicians” .....	80
5.2.7.	“Talking with Facebook” .....	84
<b>5.3.</b>	<b>Story line analysis.....</b>	<b>87</b>
5.3.1.	Narrative 1: Empowering the citizens through information .....	87
5.3.2.	Narrative 2: Promotion for democracy .....	88
<b>5.4.</b>	<b>Positioning type, purpose and goal .....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>5.5.</b>	<b>Discussion: A promotional campaign with democratic potential .....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>95</b>
	<b><i>Bibliography</i> .....</b>	<b>98</b>
	<b><i>Appendix</i> .....</b>	<b>111</b>

## 1. Introduction

With the turnout in the European elections reaching an all-time low of under 43 percent in 2014, the legitimacy of the European Parliament (EP) is increasingly threatened. It is evident that the EP will need to increase its efforts to mobilise citizens to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections in May 2019. From the viewpoint of the deliberative democratic theory, this can be achieved through involving the citizens of the European Union in a public discussion about the EU in general and the EP in particular.

Facebook and other social media have created a new paradigm which allows large scale, direct interaction between political institutions and citizens (Van Dijk 2013). In the case of Europe, they moreover provide for a geographically unbound discussion board for citizen from all over EU (Meriläinen & Vos 2010, 2). As such, social media potentially offers an online space for European citizens to control the EP and the EP to prove its legitimacy (Hepp, Brüggemann, Kleinen-von-Königslöw, Lingenberg & Möller 2012, 65). Previous research has shown that the amount of news coverage about the EP in mass media is low, despite the professionalisation of the institutions' press work (Laursen & Valentini 2014, 2; Meyer 2009, 1060).

Social media offers a window of opportunity for the EP to address its lack of legitimacy and engage the citizens in a public online deliberation about European issues. However, social media communication bypasses journalistic scrutiny, gives the institution complete editorial control over the published content and allows them to issue promotional campaigns that put forward a strategic narrative to justify its executive actions (Price 2012, 11). There are different views on whether the professionalised communication of political institutions can go hand in hand with democratic deliberation. Some authors as well as professional of the promotional industries argue that communication tailored to appeal to a target audience can increase the interest in politics. Others warn that social media has become a tool for institutional image management, replacing critical news coverage with one-sided promotion (Davis 2013, 21ff). Deliberation, on the other hand, necessarily includes that the communication between a political actor and citizens influences the political decision-making (Ivic 2017, 83).

In this study, I aim to explore the relationship of EP's institutional online communication strategy on the social networking site Facebook to the European public sphere. The institutional communication on Facebook is understood here as "the top-down process of the unmediated, direct, online communication taking place between the EU and the general public"

(Michailidou 2007, 1). The European public sphere is understood as the “communicative infrastructure used for debating the legitimacy of the project of European integration” (Trenz 2009, 35). This study’s theoretical underpinning hence combines two academic debates: one about the democratic deficit in the EU, which can be explained with a lack of European public sphere, and one about the democratic potential of social media communication.

To investigate the deliberative potential of the EP’s Facebook communication strategy, it is crucial to consider the conditions under which it is produced as well as the subjective views of the European communication officials who can provide information about the meaning of and motivation behind the communication (Aagaard 2016, 2; Martins et al. 2012, 308). This study is hence based on two data sets: The first set consists of field notes from a two week long participant observation in the Web Communication unit at the EP’s Directorate-General for Communication in February 2018. The second one entails eight semi-structured interviews with EP web communication officials working with Facebook, including the Head of Unit, conducted during the same period of time. It is assumed that the combination of both data sets adds value to the study because it contributes to the interpretation and contextualisation of its findings. The data was collected more than one year before the upcoming European elections in May 2019 and therefore describes ordinary events.

As a method, a qualitative analysis based on the positioning theory will be conducted (Harré & Maghaddam 2003; James 2011). In particular, I will look at which role the EP communication officials claim in the construction of a European public sphere by investigating how they position themselves in relation to the EU citizens, the media, politicians as well as the company Facebook. Thereby, I will pay special attention to the narratives the officials use to legitimise the claimed role and their working practices on Facebook. Based on this analysis, I will critically evaluate the EP’s communication’s value for the European public sphere. The research questions to be answered in this study are thus:

**RQ:** How do the members of the EP’s Web Communication unit make sense of the institutional communication on the official EP Facebook?

**SRQ:** How do the members of the EP’s Web Communication unit perceive their own role from the perspective of the European public sphere?

The goal of the study is to offer a critical evaluation of the EP’s approach to social media communication and to contribute to the body of literature that explores which role the European

institutions are seeking in creating a European public sphere. Research, taking into account the institutional perspective, is crucial because knowledge about the political impact of the EU's online dialogues is still vague (Hennen 2016, 40). Studies about the EP's approach to communication are moreover important as most of the scholarly attention has gone to the institutional communication of the Council of the EU respectively the Council of Ministers or the European Commission (Laursen & Valentini 2014, 2). At the same time, the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) has increased the power of the EP. As a result, the institution faces higher normative expectations towards its role as a democratic legislator than the other EU institutions (Stie 2013, 1f). Finally, European public sphere research often concentrates on communication at election times. The consequence is a lack of knowledge about ordinary institutional communication (Gattermann 2013, 437). The study of ordinary events is however important because, from the perspective of deliberation democracy, public deliberation guiding governance decisions should be an on-going procedure while European elections take place only every five years.

The study's structure is the following: Because the research draws on different topical debates, the first three chapters will deal with literature that informed the research's theoretical backgrounds. In the next chapter (Chapter 2), the deliberative theory of public sphere and different models of a European public sphere that built up on this normative theory are presented. By showing findings about the coverage of the EU in the mass media, the chapter also sheds light on current deficiencies in the deliberative European public sphere. Chapter 3 looks at the relation between new online media and democracy as well as how social media has changed the public discourse. It also deals with the social media communication of political institutions, which is often promotional. In this chapter, the institutional communication of the EP is also described. Chapter 4 describes the methodology used in this study. Subsequently, Chapter 5 presents the findings of the qualitative interviews with the EP communication officials and critically discusses the findings from the perspective of the deliberative theory of democracy. In the final chapter (Chapter 6), the main results of the analysis are summarised and an outlook for future research is provided.

## 2. The European Public Sphere

Worldwide, the European Union is often considered as a political success story: By constituting a globally *sui generis*, non-statist political system with 28 member states (Laffan 2004, 75), it has created significant peace and wealth on the previously war-torn European continent. In 2012, it was rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize for its contributions of transforming formerly autocratic states into liberal democracies and defending human rights.

Yet inside the EU, the situation looks different: The public support for the European integration, which involves the gradual transfer of national sovereign rights to the supranational level (Börzel & Risse 2009, 217f), is low. After popular votes in Denmark (1992), France (2005) and the Netherlands (2005) had slowed down further integration, the term “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe & Marks 2009, 5) has been coined. It pits the pro-European elites who profit from the economic growth and job creation against the citizens who struggle to understand how the opaque and complex decision-making on a European level benefits them (Gaxie 2011, 15f).

Facing weak public support, the EU institutions have reacted with an institutional reform designed to reduce the democratic deficit of the EU. The Treaty of Lisbon (2009) recognised citizens as the only source of power and legitimacy in the EU and strengthened the European Parliament’s role in legislative process (Weidenfeld & Wessels 2009, 357f). Despite of the aim to strengthen citizen participation in the EU politics, the voter turnout in the European elections has been constantly decreasing: from 62% in 1979 to 42,6% in 2014.<sup>1</sup> In autumn 2018, only 49% of the European citizens believes that their voice counts in the EU. 47% believe it does not, which is 20 percent points less than in 2013 (Standard Eurobarometer 90, 11). The “crisis of representative democracy” (Davis 2013, 136) seems to have thus escalated at the EU level.

### 2.1. The European Union’s democratic deficit from a deliberative perspective

Amongst scholars, political commentators and EU officials alike, the existence of a “democratic deficit” in the European polity is widely recognised (Moravcsik 2004, 348).<sup>2</sup> Because in political theory democracy generally refers to the rule of the people (Karppinen 2013, 1), the

---

<sup>1</sup> European Parliament: Results of the 2014 European Elections. Retrieved December 2, 2018 from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html>

<sup>2</sup> However, some authors think that the EU is in fact democratically legitimate, for example Moravcsik (2004).



term refers to a lack of political legitimacy and accountability of the EU institutions (Vesnic-Alujevic & Nacarino 2012, 63f).<sup>3</sup> For a political institution, legitimacy means “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, 574). According to Dahlgren (2015, 6), the EU’s legitimacy deficit “derives from the inadequate democratic anchoring” and is hence a result of the democratic deficit.

There are different approaches in the social sciences to explain the deficiencies that occur in the EU’s democracy (Biebricher & Vogelmann 2014, 2). While the institutional scholarship scrutinises deficiencies in the EU’s institutional architecture, constructivist scholarship asserts that the EU’s problems are located in the social realm (Schmidt 2012, 4). Constructivists argue that the EU people need to move away from the “social and cultural persistence of the nation state” (Hennen 2016, 21) in order for a European democracy coming into being. From this perspective, knowledge and culture is socially constructed through communication. Therefore, much constructivist research on the EU’s democracy focuses on the public sphere.

The public sphere “can be defined as a communication system that mediates between the citizens at the micro-level and the governmental system at the macrolevel” (Walter 2017, 751). Public sphere theories are closely related to democratic theory, which regards a mediating sphere between government and constituency as a central characteristic of democratic systems (ibid, 749). While “[d]emocratic theory focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process; theories of the public sphere focus on the role of public communication in facilitating or hindering this process” (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards & Rucht, 2002, 289).

Different traditions in democratic theory postulate different theories of democratic public sphere according to their normative underpinnings (Ferree et al. 2002, 289f). The *liberal* or *representative* democratic theory evaluates democratic systems based on the political representation of attitudes, values and interests in society (Stie 2013, 4f). Its most important feature are hence elections. Thus, in the vote-centric representative democratic theory the public sphere’s central function is to provide information and transparency about governmental action. Political representatives, experts and the media are supposed to make this information available in order for the citizens to make a rational choice at election time. In the representative theoretical tradition, the citizens are hence not supposed to participate in the public

---

<sup>3</sup> With its underlying concepts having changed over time, the term democratic deficit has not been consistently used (Vesnic-Alujevic & Nacarino 2012, 63f)

discourse (ibid; Ferree et al. 2002, 290f). The *poststructuralist* democratic theoretical tradition entertains a more inclusive notion of the public sphere. Poststructuralists see the public sphere as a space for the struggle for power between multiple groups with irreconcilable differences in values and attitudes (ibid, 314ff).

Most studies on the European public sphere have built upon *deliberative* democratic theories (Walter 2017, 750). It sees the public will formation through rational deliberation preceding the vote as being essential for finding a societal consensus that legitimises democratic governance (Ferree et al. 2002, 300ff). A central characteristic of talk-centric deliberative theories is the popular inclusion: The public sphere should entail the voices of actors from the political landscape's periphery such as small parties, NGOs, interest associations and civil society actors (ibid, 300; Stie 2013, 4). According to this view, the communication deficit, because of a lack of a public deliberation of EU policies, is a central part of the EU's democracy (Meyer 1999).

In the following section, I first explain the deliberative model of the public sphere and why it offers, despite its critique, a useful normative framework to analyse the European public sphere. Secondly, I present how the deliberative model has been applied on the transnational level to conceptualise the European public sphere as a patchwork of media coverage. Consequently, I discuss how a deliberative network approach is best suited to capture communication taking place online as part of the European public sphere.

### **2.1.1. The deliberative model of democratic public sphere**

The deliberate notion of the democratic public sphere has been strongly influenced by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas' popular works "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" (1962) and "The Theory of Communicative Action" (1981) (Salovaara-Moring 2009, 11; Dahlberg 2013, 3). Even though Habermas' normative theory has been the subject to a vast range of critique (Calhoun 1992), it is acknowledged that its normative criteria serve an important heuristic function in the evaluation of media performance (Karppinen 2013, 3). It has also informed a majority of present European public sphere scholarship (Walter 2017, 750).

The central argument of deliberative theorists adhering to the Habermasian approach is that the legitimisation of democratic governance is created through public deliberation (Ferree et al. 2002, 300f). In contrast to the representative democratic theory, the deliberate theory pays attention to the *procedure* of public will formation (Mouffe 2000, 5). For it to fulfil its democratic

function, normative criteria are central to the theory (Ferree et al. 2002, 301). The term public sphere, translated from the German original *Öffentlichkeit*, has hence two meanings: First, from a sociological perspective, it simply describes the public deliberation and the communicative space it is taking place in (Dahlberg 2013, 4). Secondly, from a normative perspective, the public sphere is “a basic functional principle in democratic society and (...) the ideal of democratic communication” (Nieminen 2009, 20). As Dahlberg (2013, 4) summarises it, “the actual (is) and normative (ought) are two aspects of the same phenomenon”.

Peters (1994, 45) outlines four normative criteria that according to the deliberative theory of public sphere should characterise political communication: (1) It should be relevant and centre around a topic of collective interest, (2) should be inclusive and open for every member of the political community, (3) should have a discursive structure and (4) should be equal in the sense of giving every participant the same chances of contributing to the debate. If these criteria are fulfilled, the consensus reached in public deliberation is the decision that can be accepted by most members of society and legitimises governmental action (Schulz 1997, 87f.).

Ever since the pluralist turn in the normative public sphere theory, the notion of one overarching communicative space is abandoned and the existence of different publics – theme-centred, group-bound, local, regional, and so forth – is widely accepted (Karppinen 2009, 59; Pfetsch, Löblich & Eilders 2018, 483). However, the Habermasian conception of public sphere builds upon the assumption of a common understanding of rationality that allows all participants to actually recognise the best argument as such. This requires shared norms and values and a certain degree of social cohesion in the political community (Karppinen 2009, 60).

The deliberative normative public sphere theory has been used as a normative framework to assess the political public discourse taking place in the mass media. In the mediated public sphere, Neidhardt (2010, 26) defines three groups of actors: First, the speakers, such as politicians, experts, intellectuals or commentators; secondly, the media, who disseminate their interpretations of political issues and events; and thirdly, the passive audience, which consumes newspapers, television and radio. If the mediated public sphere fulfils the normative criteria, it serves three crucial functions: It (a) makes visible attitudes and values existing in society, (b) controls and validates expressed information, and (c) gives orientation for the audiences on the one hand and politicians on the other hand about the consensus in society (ibid, 28ff). At the same time, the mass media time fulfils an integrative function by producing a shared sense of belonging to the political community in an anonymous mass society (Trenz 2009, 42).

### **2.1.2. The deliberative network approach**

Traditional mass media once provided the conditions for a contingent mainstream discourse. However, today's hybrid-media system characterised by increasingly intertwined legacy of offline and online media has irrevocably altered the previous paradigm of public discourse. Fragmentation and dissonance in the public debate put the deliberative public sphere theory into question. Several authors hence call for a re-thinking of traditional public sphere theories (Pfetsch, Löblich & Eilders 2018, 479f).

In recent theoretical debates, poststructuralist discourse theorists have gained increasing attention (Dahlberg 2013; Pfetsch et al. 2018). Theorists such as Chantal Mouffe (2000) dismiss the deliberative model for its presumptions of societal cohesion and consonance in the public debate. The poststructuralist notion of public sphere is based on a pluralist society, in which different societal groups with irreconcilable differences in beliefs, norms and values struggle for power. Public communication is therefore characterised by the contestation of hegemonic power narratives. The contestation is fuelled by egoism, passions and emotions rather than by a common understanding of rationality and consensus (Karppinen 2009, 54).

Even though the poststructuralist understanding of political communication is better suited to capture the increasingly segmented public sphere, it does not offer an analytical framework for empirical communication research (Pfetsch et al. 2018, 484). Conversely, the deliberative approach is broadly recognised as serving an important heuristic function in evaluating the quality of public communication (Neidhardt 1994, 38). As such, the deliberative approach is often used to uncover tension between the deliberative normative ideal and the descriptive reality and serves as a basis for critique with which public speakers, such as journalists and politicians, can improve their communicative actions (Dahlberg 2013, 8; Trenz 2009, 42). Trenz (2009, 42) thus argues for the re-introduction of the deliberative public sphere model as evaluative framework. Because of the fundamentally ontological differences between the deliberative and antagonistic theoretical approaches, the synthesis of the two approaches is often considered as impossible (Dahlberg 2013, 17).

A solution can be found in deliberative network theories developed by theorists such as Castells (1996) or Benkler (2006). Instead of perceiving the society as culturally coherent communities with shared values and understanding of rationality, it grasps society as a social network in which norms are produced through interaction (Rasmussen 2013, 100). According to this model, the public sphere can be perceived of as being a loosely connected network of multiple

sub- or theme-centred publics (Castells 2000, 501). The publics consist of different networks of experts, interest-bound, social or cultural groups (Nieminen 2006, 109). A theme-centred public can be based on ethnicity, religion, political affiliations, professions or other uniting characteristics (Nieminen 2008, 19). As the intensity of interaction within the public is higher than the interaction with publics outside of it, each networked public is to a certain degree exclusive based on the characteristics that connects it. Depending on the resources available, it can be more or less institutionalised, exclusive and powerful (ibid, 24).

The network approach to deliberation is able to conceptualise today's hybrid communication environment by differentiating between two analytical dimensions. The *representational* dimension captures all the different topics and groups that are discussed in sub-publics in the networked public sphere. The *presentational* dimension then grasps the public deliberation by central public speakers in the traditional media. There, the public speakers represent the opinions that were previously debated in the sub-publics, set the public agenda and influence the political decision-making process (Rasmussen 2013, 100). The network approach hence emphasises the intensity of communicative relations or "ties" (ibid) between deliberative exchanges: How successful a claim is in the public sphere depends on its access to power and social capital (Knops 2016, 8).

Through their two-layered approach to the public sphere, the deliberative network theory is able to capture the reality of an increasingly fragmented hybrid communication environment. At the same time, it pays attention to the communicative infrastructure, making it a suitable framework for "a normatively weakened form of deliberative public research" (Pfetsch et al. 2018, 484, own translation). As such, it is able to "encompass real-world complexity without sacrificing deliberation's normative bite" (Knops 2016, 1).

## **2.2. Theories of the European public sphere**

As the EU affects existing democracies, there is a consensus that it requires a European public sphere, or a "communicative infrastructure used for debating the legitimacy of the project of European integration" (Trenz 2009, 35). While authors such as McLuhan ("global village", 1962, 1964) or Ulrich Beck ("cosmopolitanism", 2002) have theorised transnational publics in the global context, the EU is the first supranational democratic polity worldwide to provide a case for empirical research on the transnationalisation of the public sphere in a concrete setting.

It is against the backdrop of the deliberative public sphere theory presented above that the European public sphere is often theorised (Karppinen 2009, 57). Although the theory is not limited to national settings (Trenz 2009, 36f), it was originally designed with a view to cohesive political communities that share an understanding of rationality and a commitment to the common good. In academic discussions, there is thus a consensus that the national conception of democratic public sphere cannot simply be transferred to the European level without making theoretical adjustments. Even though most authors agree that that “public-ness” is not necessarily bound to “nation-ness” (Trenz 2009, 37), the question of what a transnationalised EU public should look like has sparked robust discussion. Academic literature today posit three models of European public sphere: The pan-European public sphere model, the Europeanisation model and the network model. In the following, I will present and discuss these models.

### **2.2.1. Model 1: The pan-European public sphere**

Literature has almost uniformly rejected the possibility of a pan-European public sphere coming into being. Linguistic diversity in Europe, with its 24 official languages, makes political communication targeted at the whole community practically impossible (Eder & Kanter 2000, 312; Rhomberg 2013, 23f.). Attempts to establish transnational media in Europe’s unofficial lingua franca, English, have not succeeded in establishing a pan-European mainstream discourse (Koopmans 2007, 185). Rather, they have created pan-European elite publics (Brügge-mann, Hepp, Kleinen-von-Königslöw & Wessler 2009, 396f). Examples are the Brussels-based “Politico” or media which publish in several languages such as the British “Financial Times”, the French “Le Monde Diplomatique”, the German “Deutsche Welle” or the French-German television network “ARTE” (Hennen 2016, 35). Also, national governments, who draw their power from national elections, adapt their communication strategy to national audiences (Gerhards 2000, 288-292). While the democratic reality hence has extended beyond the national realm, the dominant popular conception of democracy has stayed in the national context (Salovaara-Moring 2009, 10).

### **2.2.2. Model 2: The Europeanisation model**

The Europeanisation public sphere model is based on the argument that a transnational public sphere does not necessarily need to resemble the national one. The reason is twofold: First, the

EU constitutes a unique political project, and second, it is not comparable with the institutions of a nation state (e.g. Eder & Kantner 2000, 306f.; Gerhards 2000, 300; Hepp et al. 2012, 21f.). What is important, however, is that it fulfils the function of democratic control.

The advocates of the Europeanisation model suggest that a transnational discussion of topics of common concern can be achieved through the *Europeanisation* of national public spheres. In a broader sense, the term Europeanisation can be described as “the process by which regions, cultures, public(s), and ways of communicating mesh” (Salovaara-Moring 2009, 9). The model assumes that parallel to the Europeanisation of the political and economic sphere, national media open their agendas for the transnational relevant topics and perspectives (Gerhards 2000, 277). According to this model, a nationally anchored mediatised public discourse thus develops into a European one when it sufficiently discusses the European integration and at the same time observes and takes into account the respective debates in the other member states.

In empirical studies, the Europeanisation of media coverage is often conceptualised with two dimensions: First, *vertical Europeanisation* describes the increase of reporting about the EU institutions or politicians, EU policies or European integration. Second, *horizontal Europeanisation* describes the increase coverage of political and economic developments in other member states (Koopmans 2007, 186). Both dimensions fulfil different roles in the Europeanised public sphere’s function of democratic control. While vertical Europeanisation controls the EU institutions and exerts pressure to prove their legitimacy (Hepp et al. 2012, 65), horizontal Europeanisation provides an understanding of the intergovernmental cooperation and mutual interdependence between the member states. In the best case, creates a sense of community and identity amongst the nations (Koopmans & Erbe 2004, 10). Because the joint control of the European institutions by the member states and the reciprocal observance of each other can be visualised as a transnational patchwork, this European public sphere model is also referred to as the “patchwork model” (Eilders & Voltmer 2003, 253).

### *Empirical findings*

A vast amount of empirical content analyses of news media content has been conducted based on the Europeanisation of national public spheres. Due to their focus on different countries and use of different analytical categories, the studies are not always comparable, comprising

somewhat of a patchwork themselves. However, when viewed together, they provide a good understanding of the Europeanised public sphere.

In the beginning of the century, German research still found a considerable discrepancy between the European integration and the vertical Europeanisation of the German newspaper agenda (Gerhards 2000; Eilders & Voltmer 2003). A content analysis of newspapers from all over the EU conducted a decade later, however, revealed a considerably higher degree of vertical Europeanisation (Hepp et al. 2012). The latter study demonstrates that the degree of vertical Europeanisation is higher in news coverage about European integration in general and policy areas in which the EU has excessive or exclusive competences. These include economy, common currency and agriculture. At the same time, there is a lower degree of vertical Europeanisation seen in coverage on social or cultural issues. Hepp et al.'s findings have been replicated by several cross-national and national studies (Koopmans & Erbe 2004; Scherer & Vesper 2004; Saurwein 2006; Grill & Boomgaarden 2017).

Walter (2017, 765) reported that the vertical actor dimension is exclusive and elitist as the EU coverage concentrates on central EU governmental actors. As to the EP, Gattermann (2013, 447) found that the amount of national coverage about the legislative actor depends on the public support for the EU, resulting for example in a broader EP coverage in Germany than in the United Kingdom. Overall, Gattermann reported that the EP receives rather regular news coverage within the EU, oriented on the parliamentary agenda (*ibid.*).

While the vertical dimension of the media discourse approximately reflects the European integration process, research indicates an insufficient degree of Europeanisation on the horizontal dimension. Several studies identified that size, geographical closeness, economic power and the historical importance of a country are structural factors that determine the amount of the coverage, which leads to a disregard for a majority of member states (Brüggemann & Königlöw 2009; Wessler 2007, Saurwein 2006; Grill & Boomgaarden 2017). Moreover, governments are systematically overrepresented while actors from the civil society are underrepresented when compared with national discourses in several member states (Koopmans 2007). Findings showing a horizontal elite focus have been replicated a decade later (Grill & Boomgaarden 2017; Walter 2017). This leads to the conclusion that the European public sphere is even less inclusive than national ones (Koopmans 2007, 199).

Scholarship on the Europeanisation model also argues that, for a real Europeanisation of the news coverage to take place, European issues must be covered from a European perspective.



Different studies however confirmed that in EU news coverage the national perspective prevails (for example, Lichtenstein & Eilders 2018). Grill and Boomgaarden (2017, 579) found that a European perspective is almost only taken if the coverage deals with EU exclusive competences. Another criterion is that the news coverage should deal with the same topics and the same time. Moreover, public speakers from different EU member states should reciprocally reply to each other. Brüggemann and Königslöw's (2009) cross-national content analysis found neither convergence nor reflexivity. Convergence is however reported to increase during crisis events (Berkel 2006).

In general, findings on the Europeanisation model discourse showed that vertical and horizontal Europeanisation is higher in quality newspapers (Trenz 2004; Hepp et al. 2012). This implies that only socio-economic elites take part in the European public discourse. The European media discourse is hence characterised by "multiple segmentations" (Hepp et al. 2012, 81), including a geographic and a socio-economic segmentation.

Several studies indicated that the reasons for the weak editorial news coverage are structural. According to this research, relatively few resources are invested in Brussels-based journalism (Meyer 2009, 1053). This is because the EU coverage lacks news value: The EU's headquarters are too far away from the national capitals, the decision-making processes are lengthy and complex and the EU institutional terminology is bureaucratic (de Vreese 2003, 162ff). Moreover, the national audiences are disinterested and lack the necessary background knowledge that they would need to understand in-depth coverage about the EU (ibid). At the same time, national politicians with positions on the European level, who could direct the public attention to EU affairs, often do not do so: MEPs do not profit from publicity in their role as EU citizen representatives (Meyer 2009, 1053). On the contrary, because European elections are perceived as second-order elections, voting decisions are mostly oriented on national politics (ibid). For that reason, the national parties who are organised in European party groups in the EP invest fewer resources in their campaigning in European than in national elections (de Vreese 2009, 10, 15; Schuck, Xezonakis, Elenbaas, Banducci & de Vreese 2010, 41f). The campaigns are moreover nationally anchored, with European issues constitute "at best a minor element" (Hix & Marsh 2007, 506). The national ministers and heads of state direct the attention to the EU mostly when a policy outcome stands in contrast to the national interest. In that case, they blame the EU institutions for it. When a policy matter is however beneficial for their member state, they present themselves as defenders of the national interest (Meyer 2009, 1053).

Taken together, the empirical findings on the Europeanisation model show that through the mass media, “[a] ‘public sphere’ related to policy-making on the European level only emerges—if at all—on an ‘issue by issue’ basis and is usually restricted to small ‘expert-communities’” (Hennen 2016, 21). This challenges the notion that the communication infrastructure to discuss European policies in the mass media is able to fulfil its democratic function and nurture the EU’s legitimacy. According to Hennen (2016, 39), it is therefore important to consider also internet communication in the European public sphere research, as “the Internet will not be a substitute for the public sphere made up by mass media, but is now and will in the future increasingly be used as a means of political information and communication”. The third model of the European public sphere therefore takes into account publics that are constituted apart from the mass media. It is suitable to conceptualise communication about the EU taking place on political social media pages.

### **2.2.3. Model 3: The network model of the European public sphere**

In academic discussions the growing popularity of political online communication has been linked to a possible emergence of a more lively and less elitist European public sphere (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012a, 2012b; Hennen 2016; Valentini 2006). The third model of European public sphere hence does not only focus on mass media, but takes into account online as well as niche media. Then, the European public communication is not only characterised by an abundance of political issues, cultural interpretations and languages, but also by an ever increasing proliferation of media and communication channels (Rasmussen 2013, 102). Because of the complex nature of the European public communication, it seems apparent to conceptualise the European public sphere as “a complex network of topics and viewpoints circulating as multiple voices on local, national and international scales” (ibid).

A popular network model for the European context was developed by Nieminen (2006, 2008, 2009). As described in Chapter 2.1.2., the European public sphere is theorised as a network of thematically concentrated and separable publics based on certain uniting characteristics. In order to be relevant for the European public sphere, they do not need to be pan-European or transnational. The important characteristic is that their topics of discussion are relevant for all EU citizens (Nieminen 2008, 24). The European public sphere is then constituted through a public deliberation of pre-debated claims (ibid). As a network, it is characterised through stronger communicative ties within it than outside of it. In practice, this means that EU citizens

and public actors interact because European issues unite them. In relation to national public sphere, however, the European public sphere is characterised by weak ties because the overall intensity of the interaction is not as high as in a national context (Rasmussen 2013, 102f).

Given the fact that the network approach to the European public sphere captures publics that form around individual policy issues and problems, the publics in the model are often understood to be expert publics (Hennen 2016, 36). The network model is hence often propagated by critics of the deliberative public sphere theory, who reject the idea of a rational consensus – especially in a multicultural and diverse Europe (Karppinen 2009, 58). Several scholars point out that a poststructuralist notion of the European public sphere can explain new democratic practices, for example why organised interest groups and lobbies have more influence in the EU than voters and protesters on the streets (Salovaara-Moring 2009, 10). Critics of the antagonistic network model, however, accuse it of being too exclusive since it only takes into consideration only elitist sub-publics (Eilders & Voltmer 2003, 253). It leaves open the question of how these organised interest groups generate legitimacy for their claims in the wider European public as well as how the EU's governance can be legitimised by its citizens who are left out of this system of "privileged pluralism" (Binderkrantz, Christiansen & Pedersen 2015, 95) among organised interests (Eilders & Voltmer 2003, 253; Hennen 2016, 36).

In order to conduct research into the online communication about European issues involving ordinary European citizens in the internet, so into the "electronic European public sphere" (Michailidou 2010, 66), a deliberative network model is needed. The deliberative approach has the advantage of providing an evaluation benchmark for the assessment of the quality of political online communication (Trenz 2009). Different authors have used this to perceive social media as a public sphere which creates a networked public (Vatnøy 2016, 123). Each page offering a space for a political discussion constitutes a "deliberative forum" (Vesnic-Alujevic & Nacarino 2012, 68) and can be conceptualised as an online public space creating a public. The deliberative network normative criteria model can then be applied on each public as an evaluative benchmark to assess the quality of the political communication about the EU.

In the following chapter, I will present how social media has changed the public discourse and which opportunities and risks they have opened up. Consecutively, I will explore how public institutions such as the EP use public media for direct communication with citizens to increase their legitimacy and discuss the question of whether institutional social media communication has democratic potential or if it mainly serves promotional purposes.

### 3. Social media and European democracy

Historically, “new practices of democracy” (Salovaara-Moring 2009, 10) have been associated with social and technological transformations. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) identify three main stages in the evolution of political communication in Western democracies. Each transformation from one stage to another has brought changes to the news coverage, political campaigning, the relationship between power and society and hence to theoretic concepts capturing the effects of political communication (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018, 244). According to Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), political communication in the premodern stage took place in newspapers. In the modern stage, TV became the dominant medium. Finally, the advent of the internet in the early 90s created the postmodern age. It was characterised by an unprecedented proliferation of media channels and professionalised political communication due to an increasing competition for attention (ibid). Recently, Blumler (2013, September 17) argued that after social media has become an integral part of the organisation of societies a fourth stage of political communication has begun (ibid; Van Dijck 2013, 4). For the first time symmetrical communication between politicians and citizens has become possible (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018, 244).

In the following section, I will discuss some of the changes social media has introduced to the public discourse. Here, I will present the academic debate between optimists and sceptics. Optimists advocate that the online public sphere offers a better setting to meet the normative criteria of deliberative democratic theory than the traditional media. Sceptics on the other hand argue that social media enforces existing power relations and that its technological architecture is not suited to offer a space for deliberation. Consecutively, I will look at how political institutions use social media to connect with citizens. Here I will pay a special focus on institutional campaigning. Finally, I will discuss how the European Parliament uses social media and explore the question if it can support the development of the European public sphere.

Because this study deals with the EP’s communication on Facebook, I will use the social networking site as an example to illustrate the functioning of social media in general. Facebook is an Internet-based application that facilitate communal activities and the exchange of user generated content (Van Dijck 2013, 4; Villi & Matikainen 2016, 109). The general-purpose communication platform was launched in 2004 by Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg. Today, it is the largest social networking site today and one of the most frequently visited webpages (Allmer 2015, iii; Hoffmann, Proferes & Zimmer 2018, 200, 213; Rieder Abdulla, Poell, Woltering & Zack 2015, 3).

### 3.1. The democratic potential of social media

Shortly after the launch of the commercial internet in the beginning of the 1990s, much hope was placed in its capability to create a more equal, democratic world. Traditional media was seen as undemocratic. Its economisation gave importance to news values favouring power, disputes, mistakes and scandals (Blumler & Kavanagh 1999, 215ff). As a consequence, news coverage increasingly simplified and personalized content while avoiding substantial and complex policy issues (ibid). It was also considered elitist and exclusive, banning actors from the political landscape's periphery such as small parties, NGOs or the civil society from the public discourse (Blumler & Kavanagh 1999, 209). With vast parts of society's voices excluded from the political debate, public opinion was not reflecting the majority opinion (Gerhards 1998, 694). As a result, elections or referenda were the only vehicle to reflect majority opinion (Neidhardt 2010, 32f.). The free and open internet, on the other hand, inspired political activists and tech pioneers such as Barlow (1996, February 8) to dream about a "world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs" and "that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth".

The early techno-optimism resonated in the academic sphere, where several authors argued that through the participatory new media, civic cynicism, the low trust and the lack of democratic participation characterising the modern TV-dominated stage of political communication (Dahlgren 2018, 24) could be cured. Already in 1994, Rheingold projected the emergence of a virtual community, in which everyone's voice can be relevant. The optimistic voices became louder with the emergence of interactive social media platforms. In his popular work "Theory of the network society", theorist Castells (2010, 507) suggests that many-to-many grassroots communication through social media gives the power over the public discourse back to the people and weakens the elitist mainstream media. As such, new media were able to give power back to the people and political movements worldwide (ibid; Castells 2007, 254). Other theories were issued by Tapscott and William's "Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything" (2006) and Benkler's "Wealth of Networks" (2006), both of which predict that social media will create a new participatory democracy, or Shirky's "Here comes Everybody" (2008) in which social media enhances the freedom of speech. In sum, the techno-optimistic accounts hence argue that new media enhances the participatory and deliberative democracy which results in the emancipation of the people from the established elitist power structures (Allmer 2015, iii).

In recent years, the early optimism for the democratic potential of social media in general and the technological utopian voices in particular began to decline. Especially the “populist revolt” (Dahlgren 2018, 24), referring to popular votes in favour for nationalistic actors such as US President Trump, the Hungarian prime minister Orban or the exit of the UK from the European Union (‘Brexit’), has often been connected to the use of new media (ibid). Contemporary theorists such as Allmer (2015) therefore argue for a dialectical view of technology and social media, taking into account its opportunities and risks and giving special attention to its design and “technological structure enables and constrains human activity and thinking” (ibid, 21). Thus, in the following section five techno-optimistic notions will be critically discussed from the perspective of social media’s algorithmic architecture. These notions touch upon power, equality, deliberation, participation and information in social media.

### **3.1.1. Power in social media**

Techno-optimistic view is largely based on the technological deterministic notion that technology is ideologically neutral and its effect on society are determined by how it is used (Hess 2015, 121). In the recent years, this presumption has been under widespread critique. Critical theorists argue that inequality is a central characteristic of the Web 2.0’s capitalistic network architecture where power relations are structurally solidified in the mode of production (Van Dijck 2013, 4; Ampuja 2012, 290; Apprich 2015, 123). As the network of URLs was largely woven by corporate actors for corporate interests, its goal is to concentrate the highest internet traffic on their pages (Dahlgren 2018, 21; Allmer 2015, 22). The Web 2.0’s organisational principle is the power law, also known as the “the rich get richer”-effect (Apprich 2015, 133): Simplified this means that if the number of clicks or visitors on a page is high, the algorithms will regard it as popular and position it higher, which attracts even more attention to the page (Bucher 2012, 1667f). Conversely, the fewer people who interact with a pages, the more likely it faces the threat of invisibility” (Bucher 2012, 1175). The “winner-takes-all economy” (Taplin 2017, 21) of the internet hence allows knots with a dominant position to become even more central as the network grows (Apprich 2015, 133). Scale-free networks such as the Web 2.0 are therefore characterised by a few very powerful hubs – other than random networks, in which all knots are equally disseminated (ibid, 132f).

Today, the dominant platforms which claim the most internet traffic are the search engine Google and the video sharing platform YouTube, both Alphabet-owned, and the social network

Facebook<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, Facebook and Alphabet have become two of the most profitable companies worldwide – without creating its own content or products (Taplin 2017, 8). Instead, the business models of social media companies are based on the collection of personal data, which platform providers turn into advertisement revenues (Allmer 2015, 3). In fact, the largest part of Facebook’s annual revenue comes from advertisement (ibid). Facebook collects data by encouraging user participation. To do so, it gives users the complete control over the “profile entities” (Rieder et al. 2015, 4), thus personal profiles or public pages, they want to subscribe in their personal news feeds (ibid). Facebook’s news feed is “a list of status updates of the contacts in a user’s network ... in the interest of showing viewers the content they will find most relevant and engaging” (Jouhki, Lauk, Penttinen, Sormanen & Uskali 2016, 78). Facebook’s aim of showing the users the most interesting posts or “content items” (Rieder et al. 2015, 4) is to maximise the users’ attention to the platform and encourage user participation (Davies 2018, 637). Villi and Matikainen (2016, 109f) distinguish between “implicit participation”, such as “sharing” or “liking”, and “explicit participation”, which involves the production of content, such as writing posts or commenting. For Facebook, implicit participation is more important than explicit content creation as it provides the company with data to extract personal profiles, which are sold to advertisers. For that reason, implicit participation facilitated through an easy-to-use user interface where one click suffices to like a post (ibid, 111). Moreover, each act of Facebook participation generates more the attention to the platform because through the network effect each post that was interacted with will appear in the news feeds of the user’s contact. Thus, Facebook is “designed to enhance human connections and constant connectivity because smaller friendship networks and less communication would lead to less user data to market” (ibid). In Facebook’s “like economy” (ibid, 111), the users’ urge to connect is thus employed to implement neoliberal principles (Van Dijck 2013, 17).

Critics condemn the user commodification of social media companies in today’s “information capitalism” (Apprich 2015, 139). While users are employed as data providers, they have no control over ownership rights nor do they profit from the incomes generated through their free labour (Fisher 2012, 179). Social networking sites such as Facebook are hence characterised by asymmetrical economic power relations between the platform providers and users (Allmer 2015, 5). According to Taplin (2017, 4), these are manifested through the internet’s capitalist architecture and its cyber-libertarian ideology refusing regulations or user protection rights.

---

<sup>4</sup> The top 500 sites on the web. Retrieved on January 29, 2019 from <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>

### 3.1.2. Equality in social media

Techno-optimists argue that social media's low entrance barriers for public discourse allow for a "deliberation with popular inclusion" (Ferree et al. 2002, 300). Including in that list are citizens as well as small, new and less resourceful political actors from the periphery, a central characteristic of the deliberative public sphere theory (ibid). The equalisation hypothesis emerged from the assumption that the Web 2.0 is an open space where everybody's say is equal. It argues that in the internet, the power relations between powerful and less powerful actors in the political arena will diminish as the latter one could access the public sphere independently from the exclusive traditional media and instead communicate directly with citizens (Lilleker, Koc-Michalska, Schweitzer, Jacunski, Marwick, Boyd 2011, 196f).

Critics on the equalisation theory, however, argue that offline hierarchies are merely transferred into the online sphere: The relational normalisation theory argues that the relations between powerful and less powerful political actors will not substantially change through social media (Schweitzer 2011, 312). This is because in the public sphere, the visibility of an actor or a message is a central parameter for power (Bucher 2012, 1166). In the internet, power hierarchies come into being through the numbers of subscribers, readers or viewers (Aday, Farrell, Freelon, Lynch, Sides & Dewar 2013, 3f). Powerful actors' social media initially attract more attention than less powerful actors. Because of Facebook's network structure, powerful actors can even expand their visibility disproportionately and accumulate their already high social capital (Ampuja 2012, 290): If, for example, an average Facebook user has 100, with each liking of a post of a public page on Facebook, 100 more people will potentially see it. Secondly, they have more financial resources to manage their online profiles, pay targeted advertisement and engage in data-driven political communication (Aagaard 2016, 1). Thus, several theorists think that the "richer get richer"-effect will rather enforce hierarchies, the centralisation of power and existing electoral inequalities (Apprich 2015, 131; McNair 2011, 5). Indeed, empirical research suggests that through the power law distribution only a few political candidates on Facebook attract a large number of followers while the majority of candidates remains almost invisible (Nielsson & Vaccari 2013, 2334).



### 3.1.3. Information in social media

Techno-optimists argue that the internet provides access to new ideas through unfiltered information, also referred to as “gatewatching” (Aday et al. 2013, 3). This replaces traditional media gatekeeping where news coverage is exclusive, driven by news value driven and favouring prominence, power and scandals. Free information also provides for a new democratic scrutiny of the political leaders. According to Castells (2007, 243f), their mediatised politics were marked by personalisation and scandalisation and have produced a political apathy and the erosion of the political elites’ legitimacy.

Critics however assume that the web is not the open market place for information as it is assumed by techno optimists (Aday et al. 2013, 4). The power law does not only organise the visibility of web pages but also individual pieces of content and hence the information that is consumed in the Web 2.0. Hence, social media posts that generate interaction are simply promoted by Facebook’s algorithms, notwithstanding the content.

Topics that create reactions in social media are seldomly moderate. Larsson (2016, 286) for example has shown that in the Nordic countries political Facebook posts with controversial stances towards immigration are the most successful ones in terms of likes and shares. Social media is said to make controversial attitudes more acceptable: Different studies have shown an increased visibility of racism (Jabubowicz 2018, 69f; Silva, Mondal, Correa, Benevenuto & Weber 2016, 690) and Islamophobia (Awan 2016, 17f) in both Twitter and Facebook. In the Brexit referendum, “supporters were seven times more numerous than opponents on Twitter and five times more active on Instagram” (Persily 2017, 64). Moreover, social media have been connected to a rapid growth of populism (Engesser, Ernst, Esser & Büchel 2017, 1111ff). A study in four EU member states has shown that populist actors make use of their direct connection with citizens to voice false claims and avoid their scrutiny through the media. To continuously benefit from this system, it is hence an essential part of populist campaigns to create distrust in the media (ibid, 1119).

Due to the lack of scrutiny, this new communication environment makes room for rumours, conspiracies and fake news (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018, 244; Engesser et al. 2017, 1110), so “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017, 213). Studies have shown that in the U.S. Presidential election 2016, fake news shared on social media played a crucial role in the public debate. A *BuzzFeed* analysis “found that top fake election news stories generated more total engagement on Facebook than

top election stories from 19 major news outlets combined” (Silverman, 2016 November 16). Moreover, almost three times as many fake news articles were in support of the right-wing populist candidate Trump than for his liberal opponent Clinton (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017, 212). Moreover, research has shown that during the US Presidential election debate, bots produced 20% of all tweets (Persily 2017, 70) and in the Brexit debate, one percent of automated Twitter accounts were responsible for one third of all messages (Narayanan, Howard, Kollanyi, Elswah 2017, 1). The new technologies hence enable misinformation campaigns on an unprecedented scale.

#### **3.1.4. Political participation in social media**

The technological deterministic notion assumes that technology is the number one driver of social change (Hess 2015, 121). Techno-optimists hence argue that the social media can foster a new participatory culture and facilitate political movements across national borders. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 743) have coined the term “connective action” for the mobilisation of grass-root movements whose organisation mainly relies on online technologies. Prominent examples of collective action initiated or organised through social media are the global anti-capitalist protest movement Occupy Wall Street in 2011 (Croeser 2014, 1) or several democratic revolutions in illiberal regimes including Arab Spring in North-Africa in 2011 (Bennett & Segerberg 2012, 742) as well as the Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004 (Lysenco & Desouza 2010, September 6) and Euromaidan Revolution in 2014 (Bohdanova 2014, 133f). Diamond (2010, 70) therefore has called social media “liberation technology”.

Also, Facebook CEO Zuckerberg argues that the mission of his company is “to give people the power to share and to make the world more open and connected” (Zuckerberg 2009 as cited in Hoffmann et al. 2018, 214). Many scholars however point out that the narrative of empowerment and connectivity is enforced by tech companies mainly to disguise the free digital labour and user surveillance taking place on social media platforms (Bucher 2012, 1175; Vesnic-Alujevic 2016, 423). According to this view, Zuckerberg’s rhetoric gives users the impression that their voice counts while in reality the platform’s user interface is designed to enable easy and fast user interaction only to collect user data (Hoffmann et al. 2018, 201f; Villi & Matikainen 2016, 110). Thus “a post’s like count can be interpreted as a measure of attention, engagement, or resonance (...) but, at the same time, it functions as a means for the system to decide whether to show a post in certain users’ News Feeds or not” (Rieder et al. 2015, 4).

Due to social media participation's facileness, it has become more numerous but at the same time less meaningful. Research highlighted major differences between the motivations for conventional forms of offline participation and new forms of online participation, which exceed the mere sphere of action. Gibson and Cantijoch (2013, 713f) point out that online participation is used to express personal views rather than to influence political actions. Also, Lilleker and Koc-Michalska (2017, 34f) find that the motivation for while offline participation is largely intrinsic, online participation is extrinsically motivated by wishing to be accepted within the personal network. The result is a large share of implicit participation without personal meaning, also referred to as "clicktivism" (ibid). Jenkins and Carpentier (2013, 271) hence argue for a normatively strict view on online participation, which differentiates between a political and less political approach to participation: Only if it has a policy impact, online "participation" can be called as such; otherwise, it is merely "interaction".

As to the role of social media in political protests, different scholars also point out that the role of social media in these events is overrated. While they can give visibility to democratic counter publics (Bucher 2012, 1166), the so-called social media revolutions and protests were carried out through the combination of online technologies, physical protests and broadcasting media (for example, for the role of broadcasting media in the Arab Spring: Ahy 2016; Rane & Salem 2012). Furthermore, the continuously illiberal or corrupt regimes in North Africa and Ukraine show that social media cannot equalise power relations in the long-run.

In addition, many authors point out that online technologies pose a risk to dissidents in illiberal regimes, because they enable not only surveillance for economic profit, but also state surveillance (Apprich 2015, 135f). While early techno-optimists such as Schultz and Lovink (1996, 2) still suspected that the internet is too big for state surveillance, it is commonly accepted today that the internet is used to monitor citizens by illiberal regimes. In a *NewScientist* commentary, Morozov (2011, March 2) points out that in the Arab Spring, Facebook was not only used by anti-regime protesters but also to monitor and manipulate the dissidents. In this context, the author describes new technologies that facilitate social media as a "double-edged sword". In the US, moreover, all the big platform providers, including Facebook, have given the US National Security Agency (NSA) access to their data for the spying programme PRISM (Taplin 2017, 157f). According to participants of Occupy Oakland, Facebook was also censoring posts and around 60 percent of the posts had to be reposted (Croeser & Highfield 2014, 7).

### 3.1.5. Deliberation in social media

Techno-optimist argue that social media offers discursive spaces where users can enter a reflexive and equal discussion. Critics however refute that notion due to the personalised news feeds based on the user's data. According to Ivic (2017, 83) deliberation differs from a dialogue or a debate because of its "power to transform preferences that an agent previously held. On the other hand, the term 'debate' can be applied to an argumentative exchange governed by rules". Humans, however, tend to interact with content or people that support already existing views, which is also known as confirmation bias (Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson 2014, 171f). As a result, Facebook's personalised news feeds rather confirm the users' pre-existing opinions than challenging them. This phenomenon has been labelled by Pariser (2011) as "filter bubble" (Davies 2018, 637). The term is often used as equivalent to an "echo chamber", which is a space "whereby people gather with like-minded and thereby collectively screen out information and views that do not sit well with the group consensus" (Dahlgren 2018, 25). While the term filter bubble thus stresses the technological power in the personalisation of media content, the term echo chamber stresses the users' agency in the selective exposure.

While social media's algorithms create an "interconnected spheres of public awareness" (Aagaard 2016, 1), studies show that the users are often unaware of the echo chambers (Rader & Gray 2015, 177f). By decreasing the chances of encountering ideologically diverse news content, social media consumption surreptitiously changes people's understanding of the world (Sunstein 2017, 2). This results in a fragmentation of the public discourse into homogenous sub-publics in which public knowledge is constructed in isolation (Apprich 2015, 137f). At the same time, society-overarching gatekeeping, agenda-setting and media effects through the mass media become less and less effective (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018, 247ff). The lack of shared experiences in society and a positive feedback loop through which existing attitudes and opinions are re-enforced within the segregated political groups lead to an ideological polarisation (Spohr 2017, 150f; Sunstein 2017, 9). Because of the fragmentation of society into self-confirming political groups, social media is for example often connected to the recent rise of identity politics, populism and right-wing counter-publics in the Western world (Postill 2018, 755; Dahlgren 2018, 24f). In a comprehensive literature review, Spohr (2017, 155ff) concludes that echo chambers played a crucial role in the polarisation of the public opinion in both, the US Presidential election 2016 and the Brexit referendum.

From the view point of deliberative democracy, the current differentiation in the public discourse makes it difficult for political decision-makers to identify the public opinion that can guide their executive actions (Rasmussen 2013, 99). This is why, critics warn that a further decline of mainstream journalism leads to a decline of public deliberation and gives way to what Dahlgren (2018, 25) describes as “epistemic crisis of democracy” and a development towards a stage of “post-truth”, when facts and rationality are becoming increasingly dismissed in favour of emotional accounts and subjective beliefs, which will eventually lead to a state at which the objective truth is not trusted anymore. Exposure to a variety of topics and attitudes divergent from their own are crucial for the social integrity, on which a deliberative democracy builds up (Sunstein 2017, 6f; Dahlgren 2018, 25).

### **3.1.6. Discussion: A differentiated view on social media**

After an initial phase of technological optimism, in the academic discussion about the democratic potential of social media today a differentiated view prevails. The notion that social media can enhance democracy by transferring power from the elites to the people has been relativised by shifting the attention from their potentials to their constraints (Allmer 2015, iii). the algorithmic structure with which media companies organise information for to corporate interests and through which they have power over content and conditions of participation in the online discourse (Apprich 2015, 134; Allmer 2015, 16). Despite of their effects on the public discourse and democracy, these “decisions were made by engineers and executives at Google, Facebook, and Amazon (plus, a few others) and imposed upon the public with no regulatory scrutiny” (Taplin 2017, 4). From the viewpoint on deliberative democracy, Rasmussen (2013, 97f) concludes that the differentiation within the public sphere produced by social media will decrease the possibility to find a normative basis for the public legitimisation of political actions.

Authors such as Postill (2018, 761), however, relativise the connection between social media and a decline in deliberative democracy. According to him, new media is only “an integral *part* of the total media system“. Today, the communication taking place in them is hence largely interwoven with communication in other media (ibid). According to Vatnøy (2016, 122) moreover, the reductionistic approach of the dualism of equalisation and normalisation in the academic discussion about the democratic potential of social media should hence be rejected: He

argues that more qualitative research about the political deliberation in social media is needed to better understand the complexity of its impact on the public discourse.

While the general effect of social media on the public discourse at large is ambivalent, there have been democratic instances through social media, especially when it comes to mobilising voters or protest movements. As a positive example of social media communication, especially the election campaign of former US President Obama which successfully mobilised moderate voters is often mentioned (Postill 2018, 756). Many authors think therefore that the internet helps political actors to step into a direct dialogue with citizens and thereby reducing cynicism and political disengagement (Lilleker & Malagón 2010, 25). Also, in the European public sphere research the view that social media communication can strengthen the relationship between the EU institutions and citizens has inspired a branch of research (for example, Valentini 2006; Michailidou 2007; Meriläinen & Vos 2010; Vesnic-Alujevic 2012a; Vesnic-Alujevic & Nacarino 2012). The following section will therefore explore the social media use of political actors in more detail.

### **3.2. Political promotion in social media**

According to Blumler (2013, September 17), today's fourth age of political communication is characterised by direct communication between political actors and citizens that bypasses the media sphere (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018, 244). In fact, first experiments with online campaigning by political parties and candidates were already taking place in the mid 90's (Blumler & Kavanagh 1999, 224). However, the early Web 1.0 websites were merely used as top-down communication channels to provide information and to influence voting choices (Lilleker et al. 2011, 198). In contrast, today's social media enable symmetrical communication between political decision-makers and their constituencies to a degree as no other medium as they allow the voters to become active communicators (Aagaard 2016, 7f; Van Dijck 2013, 5).

When discussing the social media communication between political actors and citizens as well as its impact on the democratic public sphere, the promotional aspect of two-way communication has to be taken into account. It is broadly recognised that the "promotional culture" (Davis 2013f) has expanded the corporate sphere and become present in political institutions. In the next two sections, the promotional culture in the political sphere as well as the promotional social media use of political institutions will be discussed.

### 3.2.1. Promotional culture in the political sphere

The paradigm that social media can connect political decision-makers with their constituencies has been put forward heavily by social media companies (Nielsen & Vaccari 2013, 2334). This narrative, however, leaves out the “promotional intermediaries” (Aroncsy & Powers 2010, 8; Davis 2013, 1). Professionals such as social media officers, communication advisors or pollsters, however, play a crucial role in mediating the communication between the political actors and the citizens (Aagaard 2016, 1). Being trained to sell ideas to the public, they are responsible for identifying the saleable product, the potential audience, the medium and the message on behalf of the political entity for whom they work (Davis 2013, 2).

The promotional professionalisation of political communication is part of the expansion of capitalism in multiple spheres of life: In the increasingly competitive capitalistic environment, in which neo-liberal thinking has become the dominant mindset, drawing attention to one’s political products is essential for generating power resources in form of votes and political legitimacy (Aroncsy & Powers 2010, 4; Aagaard 2016, 7). Because promotion has consequently become the main form of communication, critics talk about the “commodification of the public discourse” (Aroncsy & Powers 2010, 7). Today, through the increasing proliferation of cheap and easily accessible communication channels and the unprecedented competition in a free market of ideas, the promotional culture has manifested itself in political parties and institutions more than ever before (Blumler 2013, September 17; Davis 2013, 1f).

What signifies the promotional professionalisation of political communication best are the term borrowed from the economic sphere: *Political PR* describes “the management process by which an organization ... for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals.” (Strömbäck & Kiousis 2011, 8). *Promotional campaigns* are specific elements of political PR. In relation to the EU they can be understood as “activities ... which aim at informing and promoting the EU cause among citizens and other publics” (Valentini 2006, 80) or in short as “an attempt to commit Europeans to EU cause” (ibid, 84). Each campaign is designed to create varying opinions and attitudes in each public, depending on whom they are directed to. The core target audiences of political institutions usually include politicians, NGO’s, companies, the media and the voters (ibid, 83). Promotion is hence always “composed for particular audiences at moments in

history, and they draw on taken-for granted discourses and values circulating in a particular culture” (Price 2012, 12).

Until the early 2000’s the promotional professionalisation of political institutions was reflected most of all in the mediatisation of politics: Political institutions adjusted their actions to the changing demands of the media to receive an extensive and positive coverage (Meyer 2009, 1049). Today, public pages on Facebook and other social media platforms are used by political entities for self-presentation and marketing (Rieder et al. 2015, 4). Because Facebook offers access to large audiences, permanent campaigning on the platform has become a standard for political actors today (Larsson 2016, 283; Price 2012, 21; Vesnic-Alujevic 2012a, 36). Through the behavioural data produced by its users, social media, however, allows political actors to modify their products or images directly to the wishes of different audience. This is done through *political marketing strategies* that use behavioural data to track the success of campaigns and manage the public opinion by ascertaining which issues are important amongst the voters at large or selected sub-publics (Williams & Newman 2013, 1f; Van Dijck 2013, 16; Jeffares 2014, 86).

### **3.2.2. Institutional promotion in social media**

Due to political parties and candidates’ possibility to modify their political agendas and the competition for votes, the marketisation of politics is most prevalent in the free electoral market (Aroncsyk & Powers 2010, 4). The majority of studies exploring political actors’ use of social media have therefore been conducted on political parties and candidates (ibid). However, also public institutions have adopted a market-minded mindset (Christensen, Lægreid, Roness & Røvik 2007, 8). In contrast to electoral candidates, their communication underlies normative restrictions because the heads of public institutions have been democratically elected and civil servants have been appointed to serve the people (ibid, 6f; Valentini, Laursen 2014, 5). As a result, institutional social media communication needs to be characterised by transparency, neutrality, objectivity, factuality (Valentini, Laursen 2014, 5). Political institutions use of social media for different purposes, for example to quickly spread information in case of emergencies or to draw attention to offline events (Jeffares 2014, 86). Social media is however used to support institutional communications’ ultimate goal – the creation of legitimacy.



Executive opportunities of political actors are determined by the support of their basis (Valentini 2006, 81). For the EU, it was reflected by the rejection of a common European constitution in referenda in two member states in 2005. Citizens' support and the stability of a regime is hence dependent on the success of what Price (2012, 11) calls a "narrative of legitimacy", which is the "highest level justification for states and regimes". Next to a strategic narrative, the institutional image as it is a key factor in determining the public support (Valentini 2006, 83, 88). Similar to the corporate sphere, a stable brand identity serves as a rhetorical device which can cover up ideological changes in the political agenda and disguise unpopular government strategies (Aronczyk & Powers 2010, 5f). Both, narratives and images, are however products of discursive exchange and are deliberated and contested by public speakers from media, society and other powerful groups (Price 2012, 11). Ever since online publics have gained saliency in the public discourse, institutions have aimed to enter into direct communication with their stakeholders to implement strategic narratives and produce legitimacy (ibid, 12; Valentini 2006, 88).

Symmetric online communication between the institution and the citizens means a transfer of power from political actors to a broad and unstructured online public and thereby a loss of control for the institutional actor (Price 2012, 21). Institutions hence tend to manage the public opinion by creating strategic narratives that are congruent with the temporal narrative of power that circulates in the targeted public (ibid, 16). However, in a highly competitive social media environment where the composition of the audience is large and unstable, the sender is dependent on constant cues to construct an "imagined audience", which it can address in terms of culture, language and style and adapt its brand to (Marwick & boyd 2010, 2). An important by-product of social media communication is the production of behavioural data (Van Dijck 2013, 16). Not surprisingly, local and national governments therefore belong to one of the main markets for social media monitoring software (Jeffares 2014, 86). Due to their implicit nature, the quantitative data about Facebook likes and shares alone are no good indicators to obtain information about the audience (Rieder et al. 2015, 5). Institutions therefore use feedback-based marketing strategies, which have their origin in the corporate sphere.

Grassroots marketing builds on the assumption that by empowering the costumers to contribute to the brand image, the audience identifies with the brand. Moreover, the "democratisation of marketing" allows the corporations to represent themselves as responsive entities (Serazio 2013, 92). Political institutions thus enter a dialogue with the citizens, in which values and

actions can be negotiated (Valentini 2006, 83, 88). The generated audience data, including preferences, values and concerns, is constantly implemented in institutional image management. It also influences the style of the communication and the information that is released. Like this, the institutional actors can comply with the norms of objectivity, factuality but avoid tensions between the institution and the audience and generate legitimacy in through tailored communication with selected audiences (*ibid*). Institutional social media pages can be imagined as a “discursive arenas in which the norms that govern the communication are derived from local practices rather than an any idea of universal reasonableness or other criteria traditionally associated with public deliberation” (Vatnøy 2016, 123f).

On social network sites such as Facebook, the generation of audience feedback serves another purpose: Through engaging the target group with messages and generating interaction, the posts issued by the institution are disseminated through the users’ personal networks (Van Dijck 2013, 17). In the case of the EU, this mechanism also enables strategic narratives to reach audiences across national borders (Price 2012, 14). Institutional social media strategies are hence premised on the bottom-up principle, but function as a hidden mechanism for disseminating political messages top-down (Serazio 2013, 98). Despite of the large audience, however, it is hard to evaluate the effect of institutional Facebook campaigns: The quantitative audience reach does not give information about the quality of reach (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012a, 36).

There is an ongoing academic debate about the effect that professionalisation of political communication has on the relationship between political actors and the public (Davis 2013, 135). As the description of today’s institutional social media campaigning shows, digitisation is a relatively new macro-institutional logic with considerable consequences for the public sphere (Aagaard 2016, 4). Supporters of promotion, particularly PR practitioners themselves, argue that promotion and democratic communication do not exclude one another (Davis 2013, 21ff). In their view, the audience-oriented symmetrical communication brings the public discourse closer to the normative deliberative ideals since it better reaches the citizens with information. At the same time, it makes political actors more responsive to the citizens’ needs (*ibid*).

Critics of promotion on the other hand argue that through information management and promotion, political content that enters the public sphere is biased and one-sided. Hence, the creation of legitimacy is not based on the truth, but on information made available with the ultimate goal to convince others (Aronczyk & Powers 2010, 11). According to McNair (2011, 23), this creates “a major flaw in democratic theory: If the information on which political behaviour

is based is, or can be, manufactured artifice rather than objective truth”. Similarly, Peters (2010, 5f) argues that strategic political communication always “has a connotation of twisted truth, if not propaganda”. Koc-Michalsk and Lilleker (2017, 1f) moreover point out that it does not make political actors more responsive as there is no bottom-up impact on the policy making. Instead, “controlled or faux interactivity is the norm in ... political communication with little opportunity for influence and visitors required to work *for* the political actor or organization rather than work *with* them”. Hence, institutional social media campaigning makes use of mobilising the citizens’ agency for promotional purposes while the control about the political messages stays with the political actor (Serazio 2013, 97).

Taken together, the scope of promotional campaigns is limited for political institutions because they need to comply to normative standards. Nevertheless, audience feedback-based promotional campaigns allow them to pre-select the published information and trick the audience into a controlled interactivity with the aim to disseminate the political message. A central question in the debate about the effects of institutional promotional social media campaign for the public sphere centres is if the bottom-up communication by the citizens has policy impact. To gain insights into how the EP has used social media and other forms of online citizen consultations in the past, the institutional communication of the EP will be discussed in the next section.

### **3.3. The European Parliament in social media**

In 2006, the European Commission published the White Paper on a European Communication Strategy, in which the EU’s democratic deficit was recognised for the first time (Ivic 2017, 82). Together with the *Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate*, it argued for “a shift from the EU as a project of the elite to the EU as a European citizens’ project” (Commission of the European Union 2006 as cited in Ivic 2017, 82f). The EP refers to the White Paper’s three principles in its fact sheet on the EU’s communication policy: (1) “Listening to the public, and taking their views and concerns into account”; (2) “Explaining how European Union policies affect citizens’ everyday lives”; and (3) “Connecting with people locally by addressing them in their national or local settings, through their favourite media” (European Parliament, Fact Sheets on the European Union. Communication Policy 2018, October). Next to numerous transnational citizen consultation initiatives that were launched in the name of *Plan D* (Hennen 2016, 32), the internet has been linked to an increased transparency, accountability and

openness of the EU institutions as well as to a higher citizen participation in the decision-making process through public dialogue (Michailidou 2010, 70).

While the initial phase of the EP's online communication strategy centred on the official Europa-web pages (Michailidou 2010, 70), shortly before the European elections in 2009 the EP opened its first social media page on Facebook. Public pages for politicians were introduced on the platform after the US congressional elections in 2008 (Williams & Gulati 2012, 5). According to the former EP Communication Director Stephen Clark, however, the EP's official Facebook page was the first one of a political institution within Europe, and worldwide (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012a, 38f). Ever since, the institution has joined all major social networking sites including Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and LinkedIn.<sup>5</sup> The aim has been to "not just to attract readers to our website, but to be where the people are. And people are on social media".<sup>6</sup>

According to several European public sphere scholars, social media has the potential to allow EU institutions to comply with the White Paper's three principles and include the citizens in the European decision-making process. Valentini (2006, 89) argues that a two-way communication can improve the understanding between the EP and the citizens as it allows the EP to "take into account the EU publics' needs and cultural values and their levels and types of involvement and commitment". Vesnic-Alujevic and Nacarino (2012, 68) write that if the citizens are being listened to, an online space for "citizens-to-citizens deliberation and political dialogue could contribute to an increase in political participation". Furthermore, Meriläinen and Vos (2010, 2) suggest that social networks allow for a pan-European debate having the potential to create new publics without temporal, spatial and status-related restrictions. Michailidou (2010, 68) adds that in social media the genuine voice of the EU institutions can be heard.

Until today, there have been only a few studies investigating the reach and success of the EP's political online dialogues (Hennen 2016, 40; Vesnic-Alujevic 2016b, 194). This can be explained with two reasons: First, in their historical review of EU communication research, Müller, Reckling and Weiß (2014, 6ff) identify a prevalent research focus on the mass media arena and attest to general shortcomings in research of top-down communication by EU officials. Secondly, institutional communication research has mostly focussed on the Commission as

---

<sup>5</sup> European Parliament. The social network at a glance. Retrieved January 26, 2019 from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/external/html/socialmediaatagance/default\\_en.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/external/html/socialmediaatagance/default_en.html)

<sup>6</sup> European Parliament. Parliament on social media. Retrieved January 21, 2019 from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/stay-informed/social-media>

“the EU’s official voice” (Michailidou 2010, 66) and to a lesser extent on the Council. The EP on the other hand has not drawn a lot of attention (Laursen & Valentini 2014, 2). If it is researched, however, studies most often deal with the relationship between journalists and EP party officials (ibid, 4). Research on institutional officials or their campaign strategies directed to the EU citizens – who are next to journalists, national governments and interest groups one of the four major key publics – are still rare (ibid; Valentini 2013, 10).

In the following section, I will first explain the particular conditions under which the supranational EU institutions’ civil servant communicators operate and subsequently present findings on the EP’s institutional communication.

### **3.3.1. The European Parliament’s communication challenges**

Even more than national political institutions, the EU institutions face limitations when it comes to their communication because of the *sui generis* character of the EU’s polity. According to Valentini (2006, 80), the EU’s institutional communication is therefore characterised by a promotional dilemma for the following reasons: First, their scope of influence is broader since the EU comprises 28 member states. Thus, they need to communicate in a multi-cultural and multi-linguistic environment. Secondly, the EU polity consists of a combination of public institutions with different political agendas, which leads to a fragmentation of the EU’s institutional communication (ibid). The need to create legitimacy in various member states thus goes together with variables that make coherent and effective communication difficult (Meriläinen & Vos 2010, 3, 9).

Next to the promotional dilemma, Laursen and Valentini (2014, 5) identify two main challenges for the EU’s institutional communication. First, there is the *civil servant challenge*. It describes the tension that derives from two needs: to comply with the media’s new values such as sensation, relevance or conflict to receive news coverage and at the same time to live up to the normative principles of a public sector organisation. In terms of communication, these include objectivity, transparency and factuality. The scope of possibility for strategic selection of information is hence limited for the EU civil servants. Secondly, the EU communication officials face the *national media challenge*. It derives from the fact that journalists and editors in different countries find different aspects of EU news newsworthy, which requires the adaptation of the communication to different national, cultural and political settings (ibid). Even

though defined by in the context of the EU's institutional press relations, both challenges are also true for online communication. In the case of the EP's social media communication, the national media challenge is reflected in the existence of multiple, member state-based Facebook pages featuring country specific content in the national languages.

The co-existing of multiple institutions can explain why each institution is given a specific role in the EU's institutional communication framework. The specific role of the EP's communication is stated as the following:

As in previous years, Parliament intends to keep citizens informed about the 2019 elections and their importance for the future of Europe. The institutional communication action is non-partisan and will run in support of the political parties' and candidates' individual campaigns. As it is non-partisan, it will focus on what the EU and Parliament have achieved and not on what they ought to achieve. (European Parliament, Fact Sheets on the European Union: Communication Policy 2018, October).

The politically neutral, informative and retrospective approach to communication aiming at raising awareness about the European elections and the EP's and EU's past accomplishments that is described in the statement reflects the additional communication challenges the EP in particular is facing: First and as mentioned in the statement, as an institution without a consistent political agenda, the EP's institutional administration's communication must be a-political, non-aligned and represent the voice of all the different parties, MEPs and the EP's President (Valentini 2013, 7f). Secondly, its political decision-making process is lengthy and complex and it lacks competences in several key policy areas, which are able to draw public attention, such as defence (Anderson & McLeod 2004, 898). These two challenges might be, next to its non-partisanship, another reason for a retrospective coverage of the institution's work and the focus on achievements. As a result, however, the orientation towards events has the potential to attract journalistic interest (Martins et al. 2012, 308).

### **3.3.2. Findings on the European Parliament's institutional communication**

While the online communication of the EP has not been extensively studied, its social media communication has been explored even less (Hennen 2016, 40). Hence, I will first present findings regarding the EP's press work and media relations because they offer insights into the general conditions under which the EP's communication is produced. Hence, they have implications for the EP's social media campaigning today. Subsequently, I present studies that have dealt with the direct communication between the institution and the citizens in the internet.

### *Press work and media relations*

Several scholars have criticised the institutions' press services for their reactive communication and incapability to adjust themselves to the logic of the media and ascribed to them at least part of the responsibility for their low visibility in public media (for example, Meyer 1999). Amongst the problems for correspondents are the complexity and technical nature of the press releases and the heavy volume of information released every (Martins et al. 2012, 305f).

Research showed that during the last two decades, the EP has adapted mediatisation on an organisational level by granting press work a bigger meaning and expanding personnel and financial resources (Laursen & Valentini 2015, 2). Laursen and Valentini (2015, 35f) also found that the press officers pre-select interesting topics from the institutional agenda and strategically target multipliers, so EU-expert journalists from influential media. Valentini (2013, 11) moreover recognised that EP has diversified its communication efforts, for example, by seeking cooperation with civil societies to disseminate information through other channels that might be closer to the citizens. According to Meyer (2009, 1050), shifting the attention and resources to most publicised topics, promote good and de-emphasise bad news, reducing the own vulnerability through stricter gate-keeping and professionalising the communication are clear signs of mediatisation. Even though according to findings by Martins et al. (2012, 316), the EP's press services are judged as more media-friendly than the Commission's equivalents by journalists, the professionalisation has also negative impacts: The journalist perceive the promotional nature of the press releases and consider them as "bad to find the truth" (ibid, 313).

Studies based on interviews with the civil servants that work in the Directorate-General for Communication reveal continuous deficiencies in the EP's press work. Martins et al. (2012, 312) found that the press releases are still rather technical. Moreover, the press officials feel restricted by the institutional normative standards, which make it harder to write attractive press releases (ibid, 313). Anderson and McLeod (2004, 902) discovered that the press officers feel that the EP's press services are underfinanced because the MEPs, who decide upon the EP's administrative budget, see themselves and the Commission as main communicators. Consequently, the inquiry uncovers a rivalry between the institutions, who "steal all of the 'glory' concerning EU policy successes for themselves." (ibid, 898). Years later, Martin et al. (2012, 314) found that especially the Commission is perceived as a competitor for media attention by the EP press officials. Moreover, the EP officials perceive it as exclusively their task to organise a campaign for the European elections. At the same time, Laursen and Valentini (2015, 36)

reported that the EP officials “have their focus on EP and not to care much about the legitimacy and reputation of the EU as such”. The studies hence show a continuous fragmentation in the EU’s institutional communication.

Valentini (2006, 83f, 89), who investigates the EP top-down communication from an institutional PR perspective (see also Valentini 2008, 2013), claims the one-way persuasive press agency model of public communication has failed mobilise the citizens to seek information and politically participate. Valentini (2013) criticises that the EP’s main goal is to provide transparency about its activities to the public and points out a lack of image management and promotional campaigns to commit the citizens to the EU cause. According to her, only the involvement of the public in political processes through a two-way symmetrical model of communication can lead to higher willingness to participation on the EU-level.

### *Online communication*

Online communication has become more important for the EP since the number of Brussels correspondents has begun to decline since the beginning of the 2000s (Anderson, McLeod 2004, 903). As a consequence, the EP has implemented several web sites, social media pages and public online consultation platforms such as the *Citizens Agora*, which connects citizens with MEPs on web and social media pages. Regarding the European public sphere, Hennen (2016, 24) argues that “an active public sphere is in the need of active and participating citizens, who interact with each other and express their demands, fears and attitudes towards the political institutions and authorities”. Even though the use of English on the EP’s web and social media pages has been criticised as exclusive (Koskinen 2013, 88), it can be argued that they potentially offer a space for a top-down communication open to a large share of EU citizens.

Valentini (2013) reviewed all studies that were conducted on EU online discussion platforms, including the EP’s *Citizens Agora*. She found low participation rates and a general lack of interest on behalf of the public to engage the EU’s online consultations. She concluded that the potential to build up a relationship between the citizens and the EU through reciprocal and open exchange was not realised. Tomkova (2010) showed that the *Citizens Agora* was largely without political influence in the complex policy making process and open only for pre-selected civil society groups. While no such findings for the *Citizens Agora* exist, a study by Winkler, Kozeluh and Brandstetter (2006) reported that the participants of the Commission’s *Your Voice*



*in Europe* were dissatisfied with the lack of transparency regarding its political impact. It can be assumed that the same is true for participants of the EP's consultation.

Vesnic-Alujevic (2012a) explored the EP's Facebook election campaign for the European elections in 2009 and found that the institution used the social network to inform and mobilise potential voters with entertaining and persuasive messages. Due to the large number of funny pictures, she concludes that the EP's Facebook communication was mainly targeted at a younger audience. Meriläinen and Vos (2010), however, investigated the potential of the EP's websites and social media channels to commit the youth to the EU cause. They showed that from the young citizens in Finland, particularly those who are disappointed with the EU do not visit the EP's web or social media pages such as *EuroparlTV* and can hence hardly be reached through social media. The findings are in accordance with another study by Vesnic-Alujevic (2012b), which showed that the most important motivation to follow the EP or an EP party group on Facebook is to get information or to express support. The average follower is hence politically engaged and an "opinion maker". Despite of that, only a small minority of 13% of the followers is interested in taking part in public discussions on the EP Facebook page (ibid, 468). Vesnic-Alujevic concluded that the best strategy for the EP communicators is to provide the opinion-makers with information, who will then disseminate the obtained information online or offline (ibid, 469). This suggestion is supported by findings by Mourao et al. (2015, 3213), which showed that the more citizens know about the EU, the more they support it and that information consumed in social media generally fosters positive attitudes towards the EU.

### **3.3.3. Discussion: Deliberation or promotion?**

Previous findings of the EP's social media communication do not provide for coherent information about the democratic potential of the institutional online communication. The study by Vesnic-Alujevic (2012a) suggests that at election times the EP Facebook page is mostly used as an information and mobilisation channel. Also, studies on the EP's *Citizens Agora* have shown no bottom-up policy impact in the political process. Through the opaque nature of communication, which is designed to look like involving citizens in the European decision-making process, Hennen (2016, 33) argues that "there is a danger that they are increasingly perceived as being rather a promotional instrument than serious attempts to engage the European citizenry in EU policy making". Also, Valentini (2006, 80) argues that mainly "marketing communication strategies have been considered the solution to the EU's problems of legitimization".

A similar conclusion was made by Ivic (2017, 83), who explored the Commission's strategic documents *Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate*. Ivic found that the strategy rather aims to inform citizens and to involve them in a debate than a deliberation. The strategic documents on the EU communication policy hence do not stipulate bottom-up policy impact. The citizens are hence not invited to politically participate but to interact with the EU institutions Jenkins and Carpentier (2013, 271).

In the light of previous findings and the Commission's guideline for the EU communication policy, one could assume that the EP's social media pages are mainly top-down channels. But does that mean they are only about promotion and have no potential to enhance the European public sphere? Tomkova (2010, 274) argues that online interaction has democratic potential if all discussion participants, citizens and institutional actors, are equal and follow the normative rules of reflexivity and rationality. Top-down online communication can thus enhance the deliberative public sphere by making the citizens engage with political content and fosters a civic discussion culture, which then can lead to a deliberation in the offline world (ibid, 287). Also, Hennen (2016, 37) argues that even PR campaigns are a first step to create a European public sphere as they foster a pan-European audience. According to this view, promotion and democratic communication hence do not exclude each other.

To assess if the social media communication of political institutions has democratic value, it would be important to investigate the motivations behind its production and the meaning ascribed to it within the institution. Several authors argue that in the discussion about the deliberative potential of institutional social media communication and its benefits for democracy at large, the attitude of promotional intermediaries is crucial (Aagaard 2016, 1; Martins et al. 2012, 308). Yet, there has not been much research about the role that the European institutions are actively seeking in the construction of a European public sphere (Ivic 2017, 79). This study aims to contribute to closing that research gap by exploring the motivations behind the EP's institutional Facebook communication from the perspective of the EP web communication officials. In the next Chapter, I will present the methodology used in this research. Subsequently, the study's findings will be presented and critically discussed before a final conclusion is drawn.

## 4. Methods

This study aims to explore the European Parliament's social media communication as a possible answer to the European Union's democratic deficit and the low voter turnout. In the research at hand, I aim to find out what sense the staff members of the Web Communication (WebComm) unit at the EP's Directorate-General for Communication make of their daily work practices and how communication is aimed to produce an added value to the European democracy. The goal to offer a critical evaluation of the EP's approach to Facebook communication guided by the normative criteria of deliberative public sphere.

As a European institution, the EP is chosen because as the assembly of directly elected citizens representatives it constitutes the link between the EU governance and its constituency (Hennen 2016, 29). The EP, to a higher degree than the other institutions, needs to demonstrate accountability and responsiveness to the citizens' concerns as well as openness for criticism from the general public (ibid, 29f). Despite that, research about the EP's communication in general and regarding its social media use is scarce (ibid, 40; Laursen & Valentini 2014, 2). If research into the EP's social media communication exist, it captures the "election year effect" (Larsson 2016, 283), so the increase of campaign activities at election time (for example, Vesnic-Alujevic 2012a). A public deliberation as well as a promotional campaign, however, can be assumed to be permanently relevant. The study period is hence a bit more than one year before the upcoming European elections in May 2019 when the election campaigning had not yet begun. Through the study of ordinary events, however, "the status quo of a phenomenon can be revealed and understood" (Mabry 2008, 5).

As a social medium the social networking site Facebook is chosen. With 2.513.174 fans and 2.473.681 subscribers<sup>7</sup>, the EP's official Facebook page is its most popular social media page. As such, the page comes closest to providing the conditions for inciting a pan-European debate with popular inclusion, in contrast to Twitter, which is mostly used by socio-economic elites and journalists (Rieder et al. 2015, 5). With political communication defined as "purposeful communication about politics" (McNair 1995, 4), the EP's official Facebook page can be considered to be a political deliberative forum. Based on the deliberative network theory, it can then be conceptualised as an online space which produces an online public (Vesnic-Alujevic

---

<sup>7</sup> Official European Parliament Facebook page. Retrieved on March 10, 2019 from <https://www.facebook.com/europeanparliament/>

& Nacarino 2012, 68). The size of the online public might exceed the numbers of active followers as the posts can also reach Facebook users who do not actively follow the EP's page.

To assess the EP's Facebook communications' deliberative potential, it is important to take into account the views of the EP communication officials (Aagaard 2016, 2). In the European public sphere research, qualitative interviews have been used to explore the conditions under which the EP's institutional communication is produced (for example, Anderson & McLeod 2004; Martins et al. 2012; Laursen & Valentini 2015). Only a few studies, however, have employed participant observation to verify and contextualise their interview findings. The study at hand is hence based on participatory observation in the EP Web Communication unit and eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with EP web communication officials. The research questions that will guide the following analysis and inform the final discussion of the EP's Facebook communication's deliberative potential are thus:

**RQ:** How do the members of the EP's Web Communication unit make of the institutional communication on the official EP Facebook?

**SRQ:** How do the members of the EP's Web Communication unit perceive their own role from the perspective of the European public sphere?

#### **4.1. Research design**

This research employs a qualitative interview analysis. Qualitative research method are most suitable for explorative research aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of an not yet well understood social phenomenon (Mabry 2008, 4). In contrast to quantitative sciences, qualitative research hence offers a "first-order understanding" of a phenomenon of interest (Brinkmann 2013, 23). As common in constructivist qualitative research, the research process in this study is hence inductive. The research questions as well as the findings are however mediated by theory (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton & Ormston 2013, 12).

While quantitative methods are often perceived as more objective and non-reactive, a major advantage that qualitative research offers is that it is methodologically more flexible (Bryman & Buchanan 2018, 4f). Qualitative research allows the researcher to improve the design while the data collection process is ongoing, which can produce knowledge gains and an added value to the study (Brinkmann 2013, 46f; Mabry 2008, 4f). Due to the relatively large autonomy of

the researcher, however, interpretative research is prone to distortion due to factors such as biased case selection, informal research designs, subjective conclusions and non-replicability (Gerring 2011, 1136). The researcher can avoid distortion by documenting the research process thoroughly and being open about the research interest and motives (ibid).

The following analysis is based on a critical constructivist stance (Hopf 1998, 181). The theoretical assumptions is that reality is a social phenomenon, which can only be grasp through socially constructed meanings. Those are not universal but depend on factors such as time, place and social context. Its epistemology is interpretivism, which assumes that in order to understand the social reality, both, the research objects as well as the researcher's understanding are required. Because the researcher cannot be free from his own prejudices and values, the research findings cannot be value free.

#### **4.2. Data collection**

The data corpus for this study consists of two data sets: first, a set consisting of field notes through participant observation in the EP's WebComm unit and secondly, a set of data generated through eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with communication officials working with the EP's official Facebook page.

The data was collected during a study visit in the EP's administration from 19 to 28 February 2018. The EP offers study visits with the maximum of one month with the aim to "provide citizens aged 18 or over with opportunities for more detailed study of specific subjects relating to European integration".<sup>8</sup> The study visit was conducted in DG COMM's WebComm unit. DG COMM "communicates the political nature of the institution and the work carried out by its Members"<sup>9</sup>. It comprises directorates for media, campaigns, liaison offices, visitors and resources. The unit WebComm is located in the Directorate for Campaigns. It comprises web editors, social media editors and audio-visual producers. Each social medium is assigned a team. The unit hence comprises a "Facebook Team", a "Twitter Team", an "Instagram Team" and so forth. Most members of the unit can work in one or more of these teams.

---

<sup>8</sup> European Parliament: Study visits. Retrieved on October 29, 2018 from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/work-with-us/study-visits>

<sup>9</sup> European Parliament: Directorate-General for Communication. Retrieved on November 19, 2018 from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/the-secretary-general/en/directorates-general/comm>

The EP's Facebook Team (FB Team) manages the official EP Facebook page. The page is managed from Brussels and its language is English, while the European Parliament Information Offices (EPIO) in the member states manage country-specific Facebook pages in other EU languages. The content of both kind of pages differs slightly as the member state-based pages often publish country-specific content, while the central page is purposefully pan-European.

The EP Facebook page's most important feature is the news feed on which at least two posts are published daily. The posts always include a short paragraph of written information as well as a photo or a video and a link to further information about the post's topic on the EP website. Usually, the content informs the reader about the EP's institutional agenda, votes or resolutions but occasionally also about European matters in general. Under each post, Facebook users can comment. The comments are subject to a moderation policy, which is published on the page. The page has links to the EP information centre website, the EP website, the political groups and the MEPs, amongst others. Moreover, all EP reports and resolutions are uploaded.

#### **4.2.1. Data set 1: Participant observation**

During the first week of the study visit (February 19-23, 2018), I used participants observation to gain understanding of internal working procedures. Participant observation is a qualitative research method where the researcher participates in everyday life of the study objects with the objective to learn about it (Zahle 2017, 467). It hence differs from outsider observation through the active participation of the researcher (ibid). The lived experiences are captured through constant observatory fieldnotes (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor 2012, xiv).

During my field research as a participant observer in the EP's WebComm unit, I was assigned an office desk, a computer, an email address. I also got a user name with which I could access internal servers with shared folders and documents. Even though I was not supposed to copy them or use them in this analysis, I was able to review the documents to get information about the internal approach to communication. I constantly compared them with the posts that have been published on the EP's official Facebook page in the week during a study visit.

In addition, I was involved in the execution of working tasks. For example, I assisted in a live video production of an interview with MEP and Vice-Chair of the Special Committee on Financial Crimes, Tax Evasion and Tax Avoidance Ana Gomes, which was broadcasted on Facebook. Moreover, I wrote and published a Facebook post on the EP's official page. This way,

I experienced the application of internal rules and guidelines for the institutional online communication in practice. Most importantly, however, I attended two weekly meetings of the FB Team. In these, the members went through the weekly schedule, assigned tasks and talked about the general strategy. Here, I got a comprehensive overview over the FB Team's work.

During my participant observation, I took observatory field notes. These informed the interview questions. In addition, I included question about two extraordinarily popular Facebook posts that were published during the time of my study visit into the interview questionnaire.

#### **4.2.2. Data set 2: Semi-structured interviews**

The second data source in this study is eight semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted with members of the WebComm unit of the EP's DG COMM in Brussels. A semi-structured interview is a method to gain insights into the experiences and sense-making of the interviewees with the aim to interpret the subjective descriptions (Brinkmann 2013, 21). In contrast to fully structured interviews, semi-structures interviews have the advantage of allowing follow-up questions. They hence offer the opportunity to further investigate new and unanticipated topics brought up by the interviewee (Mabry 2008, 7f).

The interview questionnaire was developed based on the literature presented in this thesis and insights of the participant observation gained during the study visit. The questions are primarily directed at personal sense-making of the WebComm unit's working practices but also target the personal attitudes of the interviewees to the social media use of public institutions in general. As described in earlier, qualitative research allows the improvement of the research design during the process to produce additional value for the study (Brinkmann 2013, 46f; see Ch. 4.1). Therefore, several questions based on unexpected topics and angles that have been brought up in the interviews have been added to the questionnaire during the data collection. Hence, not all study participants have asked the same questions.

During the interviewing, I employed interview techniques that would penetrate variations in the responses (Kvale 2007, 74f). This is important in elite-interviews in order to avoid prepared talk tracks (ibid, 70). Next to asking open question, I presented the interviewees extraordinary popular or controversial Facebook posts published on the EP Facebook page and asked for explanations of their meanings (see Appendix). I also rephrased criticism on their work from the comment section on the EP Facebook page and asked the interviewees to react to it.

Moreover, I stimulated confrontations between different narratives by requesting the interviewees to establish an order of importance of three given categories (ibid, 74). The interviews were conducted individually as they touched upon potentially sensitive topics such as the evaluation of working practices or personal attitudes, which required discretion (Brinkmann 2013, 27).

The sampling method included two stages. First, the members of the FB Team were chosen by purposive sampling because of their expertise, knowledge and experience regarding the research object. Expert sampling is especially useful in new research areas or cases with a lack of observational evidence (Etikan, Sulaiman, Abubakar & Rukayya 2016, 3). Secondly, apart from the Head of Unit, with whom I agreed on an interview appointment upon arrival, the research objects were chosen by convenience sampling. The method is common in elite or expert interviews where the availability at a given time and the willingness to participate usually determine who is included in the study (Etikan et al. 2016, 1). Thus, I send an interview request to the whole FB Team and conducted interviews with those who replied to my email.

I conducted eight interviews in the second week of the study visit (26.-28.02.2018). All in all, 292 minutes of interviews have been recorded with each having an average duration of 37 minutes. Based on different degrees of decision-making power in the unit, I distinguish between the Head of Unit, the Chair of the FB Team and the remaining six general members of the FB Team in the analysis (see Table 1).

	<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Interview date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Duration</b>
<b>1.</b>	Head of Unit (HU)	Wed, 28.02.2018	10:08-10:24	16 min.
<b>2.</b>	Chair of the FB Team (CFT)	Tue, 27.02.2018	17:04-17:36	32 min.
<b>3.</b>	FB Team member 1 (FT1)	Mon, 26.02.2018	15:10-15:46	36 min.
<b>4.</b>	FB Team member 2 (FT2)	Tue, 27.02.2018	10:33-11:01	28 min.
<b>5.</b>	FB Team member 3 (FT3)	Tue, 27.02.2018	14:27-15:23	56 min.
<b>6.</b>	FB Team member 4 (FT3)	Tue, 27.02.2018	15:34-16:13	39 min.
<b>7.</b>	FB Team member 5 (FT5)	Wed, 28.02.2018	11:11-11:49	38 min.
<b>8.</b>	FB Team member 6 (FT6)	Wed, 28.02.2018	14:42-15:29	47 min.

**Table 1:** Interview information



### 4.3. Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and systematically analysed. As an analytical tool, the positioning triangle was used. It stems from the positioning theory, a theoretical framework developed by Davies and Harré (1990) and Harré and van Langenhove (1991). The theory is located in the realm of social constructionism and able to grasp the discursive construction of meaning (van Langenhove & James 2017, 7; Brinkmann 2017, 134). Its aim is to overcome the static perception of social roles by exploring the fluid conditions of social interaction and the context-specific characteristics of power (Dennen 2011, 529).

The concept of ‘positioning’ was initially used in marketing to analyse the position of a product in a market (James 2011, 93). Because of its ability to grasp power relations, it has recently gained increasing popularity social research (van Langenhove & James 2017, 8). It has been applied in international relations research (for example Slocum & van Langenhove 2003; Slocum-Bradley 2008; Moghaddam & Harré 2010) and media and communication studies (for example Weizman 2008; Leitch & Motion 2010; Miller 2013; Wise & James 2013).

In the following, I will first outline the basic assumptions of position theory before discussing its application in the context of strategic communication.

#### 4.3.1. Positioning theory as a social constructionist theory

Positioning theory conceives the world as a socially constructed normative order. It builds on the assumption that context-specific and discursively established norms expressed as rules, policies or tradition shape social action by limiting what is possible and socially acceptable (Harré & Maghaddam 2003, 5; Davies & Harré 1999, 3). The concept of a *position* in a normative order is hence used to describe the scope of acceptable actions (van Langenhove 2011, 67). The positioning theory assumes that as norms, positions in a moral order are socially constructed. Through a narrative process called *positioning* actors ascribe to themselves and others certain rights and duties in the community and establish relationships between the oneself and another (Tirado & Gálvez 2007, 231f). Positioning theory perceives all actors as active agents in the construction of social reality. The positioning narratives are hence always strategic in the sense that they take into account the interest of oneself or the group (Tirado & Gálvez 2007, 233; Harré & Maghaddam 2003, 6).

Once a position in a moral order is accepted, each individual interprets the social reality through it and acts strategically according to the norms ascribed to it. However, positions are continually renegotiated as both of their determinants are subjects to constant change (Dennen 2011, 529). The first determinant are positions occupied by other group members. If one member loses the right to an action, another one gets it. The rights and duties ascribed to different actors are hence indefinitely linked (Harré & Maghaddam 2003, 9). All in all, positioning is hence a discursive construction of meaning based on shared beliefs. It is carried out in everyday life amongst members of a group and characterised by constant affirmations, contestations and confusions (Boston 2015, 135). The second determinant are group-specific shared normative presuppositions of norms and social hierarchies (Harré & Maghaddam 2003, 9). They are sustained through so-called *speech acts* or actions. Every action contains an ideological meaning, through which norms, values and the social order are constantly reproduced (Tirado & Gálvez 2007, 243f).

#### 4.3.2. Positioning theory's analytical tool in communication

The positioning theory's analytical tool, the *positioning triangle*, was created by Harré and Maghaddam (2003) in the context of psychology. It is however able to expand the interpersonal context for multiple applications. One such application is the study of the intergroup context of political actors, such as institutions, whose "rights and duties to perform certain categories of speech acts are restricted by the conventions of interaction" (Harré & Maghaddam 2003, 5).

An analytical tool based on the positioning theory for the study of strategic communication was developed by James (2011). Aiming to analyse commercial or institutional PR campaigns, it draws heavily upon the original analytical framework, but focusses on the intentional positioning of public actors. As this analysis deals with the EP's strategic Facebook communication, it will be based on James' positioning approach for strategic communication.

The first analytical dimension in James' (2011) positioning approach is the original positioning triangle (Harré & Maghaddam 2003). It is a framework to conduct a discursive analysis along three categories: position, act and story line.

- (1) In the context of PR, James (2011, 101) defines a *position* as "the entity's point of view of its own and stakeholders' actual and potential positions". As subjective viewpoints, positions are ascribed through narrations (*positioning*). As in the original framework, each

position entails “a cluster of rights and duties to perform certain actions” (Harré & Maghaddam 2003, 5f). Brinkmann (2010, 258) suggests defining a position by identifying ‘oughts’. For example, an EP communication official might say “I ought to provide media relations training to the MEPs”. As part of a bigger narration, this statement could position the official as a professional communication expert, a civil servant supporting the political actors of the institution as well as a relevant actor in the construction of a European public sphere.

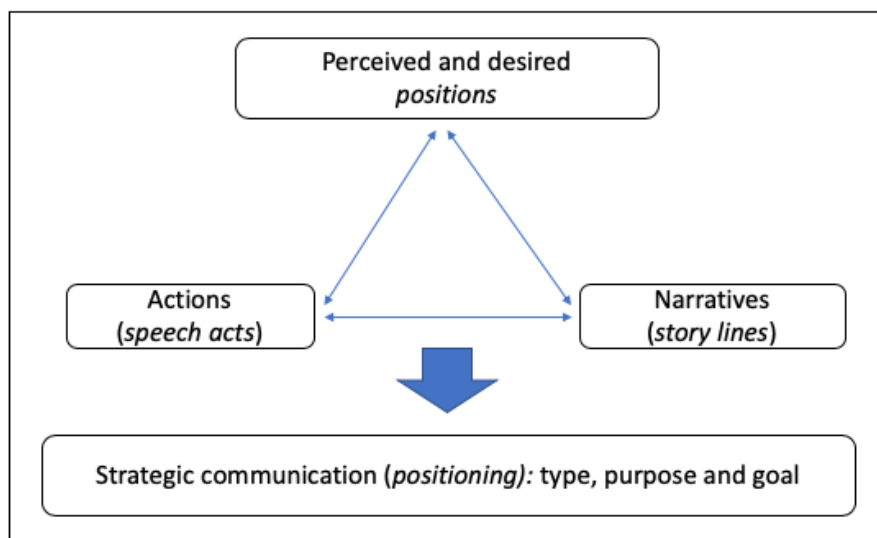
(2) A *speech act* is “the entity’s course of action chosen from among various possibilities” (James 2011, 101). In practice, this means that each communicative action has a purpose such as to inform, to justify or to persuade. It aims to trigger a consequence through which the entity’s desired position can be achieved (ibid, 102). Central to the analytical dimension is to interpret each action as “socially meaningful and significant performance” (Harré & Maghaddam 2003, 6) because they are linked to the production of certain social order. The researcher’s task is therefore to uncover the “illocutionary force” (James 2011, 102) of an action or to identify the hidden ideological meaning in words. Because it can be assumed that the interviews are performative and the interviewees tried to adjust their messages to align with the existing public image, deconstructive reading is necessary to analyse the speech acts (Brinkmann 2017, 126). It is not a clearly defined method, but its aim is to dismantle the concepts expressed in a text and open it up for construction of new understanding by revealing its hidden, excluded or opposing meanings (O’Shaughnessy & Baines 2009, 232).

(3) A *story line* describes the “entity[’s] attempts to construct meaning through storylines about the position it has declared” (James 2011, 103). In strategic communication, this happens through narratives (ibid). Identifying and interpreting story lines is thus tantamount with a narrative analysis. This is a method that takes into account the meaning and language of a text and focuses on the story that is told by an interviewee (Kvale 2007, 112). The story does not need to be visible as such, it can be constructed by several disconnected passages of the interview. Most importantly, narrative analysis can be performed as reconstruction of a main narrative of a number of interviews (ibid). The story line analysis will therefore be employed to identify the hegemonic narratives in the FB Team’s accounts.

According to the positioning triangle, story lines are usually consistent with the positionings and speech acts (James 2011, 103). They are however open to interpretation (Brinkmann 2010, 258). For example, the EP’s communication officials could argue that managing the central Facebook page in English is the most democratic way to communicate with a pan-

European public because English is Europe's *lingua franca*. Another person could argue that English excludes vast parts of the population and that the practice goes against the EU's democratic language policy.

In addition to the positioning triangle, James' (2011, 103f) positioning approach contains three more analytical dimensions for analysing positioning strategies in public relations. The *positioning type* distinguishes if the position an organisation advocates through a campaign is taken deliberately or defensively, which is "central to the purposive construction of meaning with the strategic intention of an organization achieving its goals." (van Langenhove & James 2017, 13). The *positioning purpose*, thus a promotional campaign's purpose, differentiates between intimidation, self-promotion, exemplification and supplication (James 2011, 103f). The *positioning goal* determines the objective of the campaign (van Langenhove & James 2017, 12).



**Figure 1:** Positioning framework for strategic communication after James (2011)

The positioning framework developed by James (2011) is an especially useful analytical tool for the research at hand. The first research questions ask for the EP communication officials' sense-making of the institutional communication on Facebook and their self-ascribed role from the perspective of the European public sphere. An analysis along the positioning triangle allows insights into "the ways people do things and the meanings and normativities ascribed to what they do" (Brinkmann 2017, 134). An analysis along the positioning triangle thus allows insights into the EP communicators' group identity, how they move within the boundaries between democracy promotion and institutional promotional campaigns, and the rights and duties

they claim in relation to the citizens and other actors. Moreover, instead of exploring a static role of the EP officials, the positioning approach gives insights in which forces shape that role in significant ways. As explained in Chapter 3.3.1., institutional communication is produced in the crossroad of the tensions deriving from the duty to comply with normative standards and to attract attention to the institution through professionalised promotional communication. Additionally, the public representation of the institution can be affected by societal changes such as new public demands for accountability, an increasing competition for attention, changes in the field of communication and a pressure to adapt to innovations, new legislation or changes in the norms normative order (Aagaard 2016, 2). With an interview analysis, using the positioning triangle, the researcher can determine which conditions impact the actions of an institution. Finally, the positioning theory is particularly useful to approaches to online communication as it naturally comprises a separate social realm defined by the members, affordances and algorithms of the platform (Tirado & Gálvez 2007, 232).

#### **4.3.3. Application of the method**

Based on the positioning framework developed by James (2011) a qualitative textual analysis was conducted. The aim is to extract collective narratives that give sense and legitimise work practices. Even though the Facebook Team is regarded as a unit with a shared social reality, opposing narratives will be taken into account in the interpretation of the findings as they can uncover discrepancies in the collective sense-making. They can hence signify windows of opportunities for changes of institutional practices (Brinkmann 2017, 122). Selected data extracts displaying opposing narratives will be analysed in more detail.

The qualitative interview analysis was conducted as the following: First, the interviews were transcribed and repeatedly reviewed to gain familiarity with the data. During that process, I constantly compared my impressions with the participant observation's field notes as well as with the theoretical background literature. The reflections of this process were noted as memos.

Secondly, the interview data was read into the programme ATLAS.ti, which assisted the analysis. Based on the memos, I developed initial categories and codes. Following James' (2011) conceptual framework suggestion, first the positioning of the self and others were defined. To do so, I identified and coded the relevant actors in the narrations. Based on the coded quotations entailing information about each actor, I deducted collective narrations (*positionings*). Because

the interview questionnaire mainly concerned the work of the Facebook Team, the amount of information about the team was naturally way larger than the amount dealing with the other actors. Hence, the coding process for the self-positioning of the Facebook Team was more differentiated. Because positions can be grasp through rights and duties, I coded the rights and duties the Facebook Team ascribed itself. Based on the coded quotes, I deducted a collective narration (*self-positioning*).

Next, the EP officials' concrete actions relevant to their Facebook communication (*speech acts*) were defined. Because the aim of analysing speech acts is to uncover the hidden meaning, the work practices as well as their purposes were coded (for example, "Mobilising engagement – Inciting a discussion"; "Mobilising engagement – Network effect"; "Mobilising Engagement – Audience Feedback").

In a third step, the main narratives that give the Facebook Team's work meaning and legitimise its actions and self-positioning (*story lines*) were coded. During the initial data observation and the previous coding process, I identified narratives centring on the following key words: "democracy", "promotion", "opportunity" and "competition". Because the narratives are consistent with the positions and speech acts, I reviewed each speech act and position coded and assigned it the narrative it is legitimised with. That way, I was able to improve the narratives in my memos. In a next step, I tested each narrative's applicability on each interview. When all interviews supported the narrative, I coded quotes that touched upon or summarised the narrative.

#### **4.4. Validity, ethics and reflections**

In this last section of the chapter, I discuss how the ethical conduct of this study was ensured, with which procedures its validity was enhanced as well as limitations of the research findings.

To ensure ethical conduct, I followed the four principles created by Diener and Crandall (1978 as cited in Bryman 2012, 135). These include avoiding harm as well as the invasion of privacy of the research objects, obtaining informed consent and excluding deception. From these principles, especially the avoidance of privacy invasion poses a challenge to qualitative researchers, who aim to gain in-depth insights into the attitudes and motivations of others because the research will be published (Hammersley & Traianou 2012, 106). I followed the principles by informing the interview participants about the purpose of the study and obtaining consent to

publish their work titles and transcribed interview experts. I also protected the interviewees identities by not revealing personal information apart from the working positions. Moreover, I protected the interviewees' privacy by not asking personal, political or controversial questions.

In qualitative interviewing, validity refers to how well the findings inform the actual study object (Kvale 2007, 122). Complete validity cannot be verified, particularly in semi-structured interviews, where the researcher attains a broader role in the knowledge production than in fully structured interviews (Brinkmann 2013, 21). However, the validity can be enhanced through the compliance with scientific quality criteria (Drost 2011, 114).

The internal validity focusses on the research design (Drost 2011, 115). Here, one quality criteria is that the sample is "true to life" (ibid, 114). In constructivist qualitative research, participant observation and interviewing are recognised as the most suitable methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the sense-making of the participants of social interactions (Constantino 2008, 119). However, the nonprobability sampling of this study needs be discussed. Convenience sampling is justified if the pool of potential study participants is a homogenous population (Etikan et al. 2016, 2). Because this study assumes that social reality emerges from the discursive practices, including conversation and institutional practices, the Facebook Team does indeed constitute a homogenous population (Tirado & Gálvez 2007, 230). As a subject to the same institutional culture and work practices, it can be assumed that a homogenous sense-making takes place in the unit. Besides, the aim of this study is to identify the most important collective narratives within the group. It can be assumed that the findings would not have been significantly different if a randomised sampling had been applied. Moreover, I want to address the proximity, which describes the "psycho-socio-emotional distance between researchers and the cases" (Mabry 2008, 10). Given the shortness of my study visit, I assume that there was no impact on the research findings. Furthermore, the combination of two data sets contributes to the internal validity of the study: While interviews are performative in nature, participant observations and the study of internal documents produces naturally occurring data, which can be used for the contextualisation of the findings (Karppinen & Hallvard 2012, 11; Paulus, Lester & Dempster 2014, 70). On the other hand, assessing research findings with practitioners' perception also bring added value to a study and has therefore become an increasingly popular practice (Tenscher, Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, Mykkänen, Walter, Findor, Jalali, & Róka, 2016, 99f).

Finally, even though in studies with an interpretative epistemology the truth of knowledge is secondary to the interpretation of the researcher, transparency about the construction of knowledge is required (Kvale 2007, 123f). This is provided through the interview questionnaire (see Appendix) and the description of the coding process with ATLAS.ti. However, a limitation to the findings is that the analysis is based on the author's subjective interpretations of the data and can hence not be free from personal values and bias.

The external validity of a study concerns the generalizability of the findings (Bryman 2012, 69). According to van Langenhove and James (2014, 11), findings acquired with the positioning theory are not generalisable as they take into account the specific conditions under which meaning is produced. Rather, the results can offer ideas for further inquiry of different aspects of the social realm (*ibid*). Moreover, this study is only based on eight interviews, which are primarily concerned with Facebook. Its findings do hence not provide information about the work in the EP's WebComm unit in general or how other social media channels are used. Furthermore, the study does not provide information about the EP's DG COMM's general institutional communication and its contribution to the European public sphere nor about the Facebook use nor the online communication of the other EU institutions. However, even though studies of relatively contained cases can never claim to fully represent the reality, they can, especially in comparison with similar studies from other authors, deliver a valuable contribution to theory testing (Bryman 2012, 69ff).



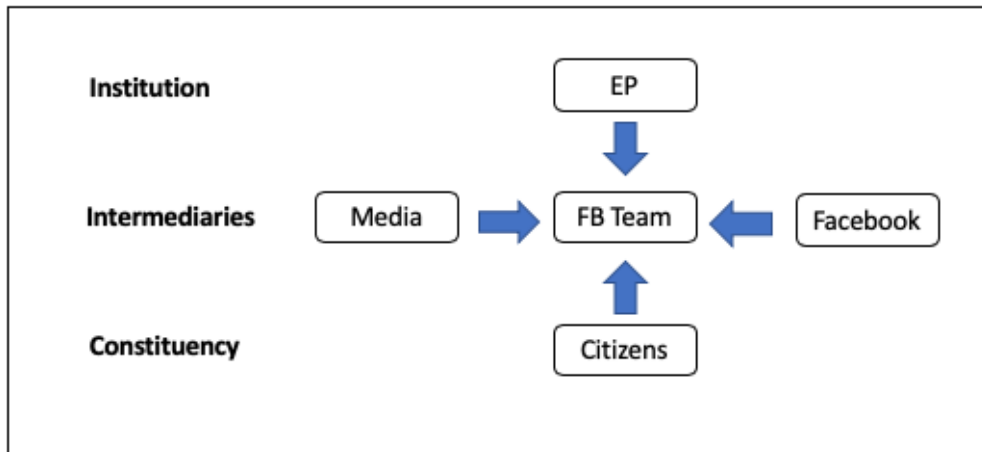
## 5. Analysis

This study aims to explore the European Parliament's web communication staff's sense-making of its everyday work practices on the official EP Facebook page. In this Chapter, I conduct a qualitative text analysis of the interviews with EP communication officials based on James' (2011) positioning theory framework for strategic communication. The aim is to reveal the motivations and the reasoning behind the civil servants' communicative actions in order to be able to offer a critical assessment of the democratic potential of the EP's institutional Facebook communication from the perspective of the European public sphere.

The structure of the analysis is the following: First, I analyse with which narratives the EP Web Communication unit's Facebook Team constructs its own role in the European public sphere. Since the narratives that define the role of other actors contribute to the narrative self-positioning of the FB Team, the analysis starts with the roles ascribed to the other actors that appear in the narrations (*positioning*). In a second step, I identify the most important narratives, which are used to reason specific actions in the framework of the FB Team's citizen communication (*speech acts*). This analysis is accompanied by a critical interpretation attempting to deconstruct the presented notions and to offer alternative interpretations. Finally, I summarise the grand narratives giving meaning to the EP's Facebook communication (*story lines*). After the sense-making of the FB Team has been analysed, the EP's Facebook campaign's type, purpose and goal can be defined. Finally, the findings are critically discussed and a conclusion is drawn.

### 5.1. Positioning analysis

The interviews revealed that the FB Team's self-identification and work practices are largely influenced by four groups of actors that are seen as relevant in the public discourse about the EP: (1) The EP as a political institution, (2) the citizens as the EP's constituency, (3) the media including different public speakers (4) and the social media company Facebook.



**Figure 2:** Relevant actors in the public discourse about the EP with influence on the FB Team

#### 5.1.1. The European Parliament – a democratic change agent

The EP is one of the most central actors of the narrations of the FB Team. It is seen as the assembly of citizen representatives and characterised by its legislative power, decisions and resolutions. These are to be represented by the FB Team, independent of the current political formation.

The EP is perceived as a democratic institution that “is directly elected” (FT3) and does what the “Europeans want the EP to do” (FT4). As such, its decisions do indeed positively impact the lives of the people.

Because of its power as a positive change agent, the EP is considered to be important. In fact, “important” is the most frequent adjective to describe the EP: It deals with “important issues” (FT5; FT2) and features “important debate(s)” (FT6). The adjective is also used to describe the European elections (HU), getting information about the elections (FT6), forming an opinion about the political parties (FT5; CFT) and voting in the elections (FT5; FT3).

While the interviewees deliberately position the EP as democratic, powerful and hence an important political actor, they are aware of the discrepancy of how other actors position the institution. In the public discourse, the EP is met by a “lack of recognition” (FT4). According to the interviews, the term describes both, the EP’s lack of visibility as well as the adequate assessment of its importance and benefits in the national news media. According to the interviewees and as will be discussed later in more detail, the lack of information about the EP’s accomplishments is seen as the cause for the low voter turnout.

Interestingly, Meyer (2009, 1055) uses the same wording when he diagnoses the European Commission a “lack of recognition in different national contexts”. Even though it is difficult to evaluate the civil servants’ perception of the EP’s lack of recognition, empirical findings suggest that the claim is justified. While the EP receives regular news coverage at least in pro-European countries, it shows also that the supranational parliament is often compared to its national counterparts, which results in a rather critical coverage (Gattermann 2013, 447).

The positive description of the EP shows that the FB Team sees the institution as an important democratic power in Europe. It is repeatedly stressed that its legislation has solid benefits for the European people. Strikingly, however, a possible lack of legitimacy of the EP due to the low public support is not discussed. This can be explained by the output approach on legitimacy displayed in the interview, which continuously stress the EP’s benefits for the people. Output legitimacy describes legitimacy which is “judged in terms of the effectiveness of the European Union’s policy outcomes for the people“ (Schmidt 2012, 2). In contrast, the notion of input legitimacy is not measured by institutional performance, but “judged in terms of the EU’s responsiveness to citizen concerns as a result of participation by the people“ (ibid). This stance is interesting insofar as in the academic debate, it is the output legitimacy in which the EU performs better than in the input legitimacy (ibid, 5). Several studies have shown that the civil servants take on output legitimacy is reflected in the EU institutional communication, which focuses mostly on presenting the benefits of legislative initiatives (Müller et al. 2014).

It hence seems as if the output legitimacy is used as a rhetorical means in the EP’s institutional communication to increase the input legitimacy. At the same time, a lack of input legitimacy is if not denied at least left out of the narrations. As I will discuss later, the interviews reveal the view that the FB Team’s job is to inform and empower the citizens to take up the power that they are having to influence EU policies, rather than fixing an input legitimacy problem. This leads to the question if the interviewees indeed hold this opinion or if they stick to their role as promotional intermediaries.

### **5.1.2. The citizens – the uninformed authority**

Next to the EP the most important stakeholder of the FB Team are the citizens. Indeed, the European people is depicted as the ultimate source of power in the EU and authority over the EP. Because the citizens also finance the institution, they have the right to get back certain

benefits from the institution. According to the interviews, the real benefits are returned to the citizens as legislation, but also include the right to information about the legislation and how the tax money is used. The FB Team's civil servants hence work in the service of the people.

While the theoretical concept of citizenship as the ultimate political authority is valued, the studied interviews represent a mixed depiction of the European people. Most of the interviewees stress that the citizens are poorly informed about the EU, the EP and its impact on their lives, even to the point "that many people do not even know it exists" (FT4).

All interviewees directly or indirectly stress that citizens are not the ones to be blamed for their lack of information in regard to the EP. One interviewee, for example, takes her family as an example, which after years still thinks she works for the Commission because they do not that the EP exists. Using one's family as a rhetorical means can be interpreted as an exonerating gesture. Another FB Team member puts herself into the role of an EU citizens: "For me, I am here, I know how it is, it does not feel [far away], but of course for the biggest part of people it does" (FT6). Since the citizens cannot experience first-hand the importance of the EP, they are just dependent on second-hand information. In the interviews, both the media and national governments are explicitly made responsible for the lack of information about the EP:

(...) the money you are investing, gives you a return in investment. (...) You do not know it because your national governments and media and so on do not do the job of coming and telling you what it is worth. (FT5)

Both actors are moreover implicitly blamed for a lack of information infrastructure. According to the interviewees, a large part of the citizenry is cut off from information about the EU because they cannot afford the overly expensive newspapers or because they lack internet access.

The findings show that the communication officials aim to implement a strategic narrative that is able to construct a good relation between the EU citizens and the institution: By shifting the blame for the lack of awareness about the EP to national governments and media, the interviewees purposefully take away responsibility from the citizens. This can be explained with interpretation of the citizenry as the most important stakeholder of the EP, including both the political authorities and the civil servants.

A more critical notion of the citizens is however displayed regarding their willingness to politically participate on the EU-level. Several interviewees stress that citizens in a democracy do not only have rights, but also obligations. Accordingly, access to information obliges them to seek information and to participate politically. The interviewees however perceive the citizens

as passive, not actively reaching out for information about the EP. As a result, the FB Team must actively approach, inform and empower them to execute their rights and duties.

Taken altogether, the FB Team's view on the citizens is mixed. While perceived constraints on information about the EU prevents them from using their power in the political decision-making process, they are concurrently not interested in a change to the status quo. Interestingly, other reasons for the citizens' lack of interest or the low voter turnout in the elections other than the lack of information about the benefits of the EP are not discussed. Such other explanations as the notion that dominant perceptions of democracy are still national (Salovaara-Moring 2009, 10) or the insufficient, nationally-anchored campaigning of the EP's political parties (Hix, Marsh 2007, 496) are not discussed. Indeed, the narrative centring on a lack of information appears to legitimise the EP's strategy to actively approach, inform and enlighten the citizens so that they can execute their democratic rights.

### **5.1.3. The media – elitist and old-fashioned**

According to the interviewees, the media plays a key role in the European public discourse and accordingly in the EP's perceived lack of recognition. As gate-keepers to the public sphere, the media acts as "intermediaries" (FT2) between the EP and its constituency. Since important pan-European, EU-centred print or broadcasting media are non-existent, national media is seen to have the obligation to inform citizens about the EP. All interviewees believe that the news media does not fulfil this duty.

According to several interviewees, national media often reports on EU affairs from a national angle and distorts the messages the EU press officers want to send to the public. Secondly, the media engenders a "scapegoat system" (FT5) by giving national public actors a platform to blame the EU institutions for decisions they had no part in. In comparison to the intergovernmental Council and the national parliaments, as well as to a lesser extent to the EC, the media gives very little attention to the EP in particular. Thus, the EP "may possibly end up being neglected" (FT4).

Only one interviewee attempts to stand up for the media by explaining that the economic crisis in the news industry has resulted in the reduction of Brussels correspondents by even major newspapers, with smaller editorial offices not being able to cover European affairs anymore at all (FT4). With the example of the German public broadcaster ARD, the interviewee also shows

that tax-funded public broadcasters from the most powerful and pro-EU member states are affected by the structural changes in the news sector.

The occurrence of only a single opposing narrative to the hegemonic narration that the media is voluntarily refraining from covering European affairs is so far surprising as all interviewees have a background in social science or media and communication studies. Some of them have moreover worked in the news media before. In fact, the interviews show that also other interviewees are aware of the news industry's crisis. There is a consensus that the impact of the news media on the public discourse is continuously fading as social media has become increasingly popular. Offline media is hence depicted as a relic of the past, forced to adapt to the new communication environment and distribute their editorial content through social media to catch the audiences' attention. An interviewee for example states that "(...) newspapers are for people above 40 and anyone below 40 simply do not read newspapers anymore. They do not watch the news on television anymore. They get the news from social media" (FT2).

This one-sided negative assessment of the media's willingness to perform as the Fourth Estate in the European public sphere can be interpreted as a form of self-legitimation. The lack of news coverage needs to be replaced by a more informative and sustainable form of communication – that is, institutional social media communication. Other reasons that are listed to justify the perceived need to substitute the news media are that socio-economically disadvantaged citizen cannot afford to buy newspapers and that the news media offers citizens mostly content that they either lack interest in or that is not easy to understand. In fact, research shows that these are in fact the reasons why journalists usually refrain from covering the EU: because the audiences are disinterested in it and lack the necessary background knowledge for in-depth information (de Vreese 2003, 162f). The argumentation on behalf of the FB Team is hence not consistent. It becomes increasingly clear that the techno-optimistic narrative that depicts the media as elitist and undemocratic is mainly strategic with a self-legitimising function.

Taken together, the media is depicted as actively damaging to the EP's public image. Moreover, they are described as elitist, undemocratic and not socially responsible. The stagnation of the mass media that characterises today's fourth age of political communication (Aagaard 2016, 5) and the media's decreasing gatekeeping power are thus seen as a natural and positive development. The one-sided depiction of the news media, which only one interviewee somewhat opposes, is part of a narrative legitimising the FB Team's work.

#### **5.1.4. Public speakers – bullies, opportunists and competitors**

Throughout the interviews, several public speakers are ascribed to the EP's current situation. In the following analysis, public speakers form one category because they occur sporadically, thus not being perceived as key actors. In addition, they comprise mainly political actors, whose status provides them entry into the public sphere. Despite being politicians, the public speakers are perceived and judged as communicators.

The first group of public speakers are national government actors. According to the interviews, they contribute to the EP's lack of recognition by not sufficiently informing the citizens about the benefits of the EU. Even worse, they strategically use the EU as a rhetoric means to shift responsibility for unpopular policy decisions away from themselves. Indeed, research confirms this observation (Meyer 2009, 1053). National governments, together with the media, are hence responsible for the perceived "scapegoat system" described in the previous section.

Public speakers also include the MEPs in their roles as national politicians. Even as part of the same institution, the interviewees criticise the MEP's in their role as ambassadors for the EP: When they speak to the media in their countries, they often do not even mention the EP, nor do they speak from a European perspective. The MEPs are thus perceived as being primarily concerned about their reputation amongst their national constituencies. Also, this observation is in accordance with literature that highlights the lack of incentives for MEPs to gain publicity in their role as EU citizen representative (Meyer 2009, 1053). As presented in Chapter 2.2.2., studies on the election campaigns by EP party groups moreover find that they rather focus on national issues (Hix & Marsh 2007, 506).

Several interviewees also point to the naïve approaches of many MEPs to their social media presences, generally not understanding the importance of strategic. Already Anderson and McLeod's (2004, 916) interviews with EP press officers displayed a dissatisfaction with the communication attempts made by the MEPs. Furthermore, research finds that also on the party-level, fewer resources are invested in campaigning in the European elections than in national elections. This is because the EP elections are often regarded as second-order elections by the politicians (de Vreese 2009, 10, 15; Schuck et al. 2010, 41f). Because the European political parties are ultimately the actors who draw the attention of the citizens to European issues, some scholars assume that the EP's political parties indeed carry a part of the responsibility for the lower voter turnout (Hix & Marsh 2007, 496). All these findings indicate that the FB Team's critical view on the MEPs' communication is indeed justified.

Finally, the other EU institutions are also criticised in their role as public speaker. Even though it is recognised that also the Commission and, to a lesser degree, the Council are suffering from an inappropriate representation in the public discourse (FT5), the two other EU institutions are also positioned as potential competitors for visibility. Findings that showed up inter-institutional rivalries are also made by Anderson and McLeod (2004, 911) and Laursen and Valentini (2015, 36). Altogether, they indicate a continuously fragmented approach and “polyphonic nature” of the EU’s institutional communication (Valentini 2013, 7).

It was shown that all three groups of public speakers mentioned in the interviews are characterised as damaging for the EP’s public image. In the narrative the public speakers are hence closely connected to the media, which gives them a platform. Remarkably, two of the three groups entail EU actors, one of which even belongs to the same institution. NGOs or civil societies do not appear throughout the interviews. This leads to the conclusion that they are not considered as relevant for the public discourse about the EP. Interestingly, findings by Valentini (2013, 11) made several years earlier showed that the EP’s communication officials cooperate with third sector organisation to spread their campaign messages. The interviews reveal that today, at least in the WebComm, instead of NGOs and civil society organisations, “influencers” (FT3) are considered as important ambassadors for the EP. On Facebook, influencers are usually understood as “people with large networks of connected followers and friends” (Villi & Matikainen 2016, 112). The idea that selected individuals with professional social media presences are considered as more influential by the EP’s FB Team than third sector organisations demonstrates the promotional professionalisation of the WebComm Unit as well as its adaption to the logics of a new digitised attention economy in social media (Aagaard 2016, 4). The cooperation with influencers will be discussed again at a later point.

Because only one interviewee mentioned the cooperation with influencers, they are not included in the list of relevant public actors. Equally, anti-democratic actors, such as “the far-right and Russia” (FT5) are mentioned but are not perceived as actively harming the EP’s reputation.

#### **5.1.5. Facebook – powerful and useful**

The interviews display two notions of Facebook: one as a medium which influences the public discourse and one as a tool with which the FB Team is working professionally. While the first



notion entails a more general description of social media and Facebook, the notion of Facebook as a tool is the basis for two narratives that reason how the FB Team uses the platform to reach European citizens.

*Facebook as a medium – a differentiated view*

Social media companies are an important group of actors in the narrations, which is obviously due to the fact that the interviewed communicators work primarily with social media platforms. While this research focuses on Facebook, it is also important to grasp the general approach to social media companies. It should be noted here that the interviews display strong interpersonal discrepancies in the assessment of their benefits and risks. Together, the interviews show a highly differentiated view on social media. All in all however, they are assessed mostly by the opportunities they offer and less by the risks they pose to the public discourse.

The interviewees recognise that social media has become an important space for the public discourse as people consume less and less TV or newspapers: “50 years ago there was newspapers and television and now you have Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat” (FT2). They also agree that Facebook offers a space for political discussion, which is why according to the Head of Unit, social media is just like traditional media. Communication on Facebook is thus seen as part of the public sphere and explicitly named as part of the “European public sphere” (FT2).

Facebook is moreover described as an inclusive medium characterised by equality. It provides for a communicative space where “everyone can have a say” (FT2) and exchange views, even across national borders. Compared to traditional media, Facebook’s lower prices make it accessible for all citizens and a substitute source of information to those who do not consume newspapers (HU; FT5). Moreover, “citizens can comment on politicians’ opinions easier than in the past when watching someone in the television” (FT2). Thus, the perception is that “Facebook and social media in general are the least elitist medium” (CFT).

The interviewees also mention Facebook’s low entrance barriers for public actors, who can use the platforms “to be heard in the public sphere in an easier way [than through the traditional media]” (FT2). Considering the disappointment with the media, a big benefit for the interviewees is the possibility to communicate “without intermediates” (FT6). For institutions such as the EP, Facebook is a “chance to give a different angle or approach to some facts to the public (...) [and] a way for us to get out of this scapegoat system” (FT5). At the same time, it makes

it easier to “connect with citizens and to go outside the walls of the institutions where citizens cannot look and that feels so far and distant from the real life” (FT6).

The FB Team hence sees Facebook as an inclusive and equal discussion platform, which can connect citizens from different countries as well as the institution with the constituency. This description stands in sharp contrast with the one of traditional media, which is depicted as exclusive, elitist and undemocratic. What stands out is the general accordance with techno-optimistic assumptions discussed in Chapter 3, for example that social media lead to an equalisation in the asymmetrical power relations between the citizens and political actors. Even more striking is the similarity to the empowerment and connectivity narratives that are advocated by Facebook itself (Nielsen & Vaccari 2013, 2334; Vesnic-Alujevic 2016, 423). According to CEO Zuckerberg, for example, the company’s official mission is “to make the world more open and connected” (Hoffmann et al. 2018, 214; see Ch. 3.1.4.). Facebook’s front page states: “Helps you connect and share with the people in your life”.<sup>10</sup> Several authors argue that the propagation of these narratives centring on connectedness, empowerment and horizontal power relations is an attempt by professionals of the promotional industry to justify their work “that relies on techno-scientific utopia and imaginaries” (Vesnic-Alujevic 2016, 423; see also Aagaard 2016, 8). This can explain the FB Team’s rather uncritically view on political communication on social media, the negative evaluation of the democratic performance of traditional media as well as the adaption of techno-optimistic narratives.

Even though all interviewees think that social media can lead to an equalisation in the political arena, at least most of them see Facebook’s role in the public sphere in general as ambivalent. This is strikingly reflected when they are asked about the relationship between Facebook and democracy. Answers ranged from a prompt “I do not know.” (FT4) to describing the questions as a “very difficult question” without a “perfect answer” (FT5), “interesting question” and “complicated issue” (FT2) or “complicated and long question” (FT6).

Most of all, the interviews show discomfort with Facebook’s role as a gatekeeper through its algorithms that control the visibility of content in the users’ news feeds. This is because the company regularly changes the algorithms, codes and interfaces of platform, which serve as a precondition for interactivity, to increase the sociality of its users with the objective to generate data (Villi & Matikainen 2016, 112f). The interviewees describe that a recent algorithm change

---

<sup>10</sup> Facebook (frontpage). Retrieved on February 10, 2019 from <http://www.facebook.com>

increased the visibility of private profile pages in the news feed, resulting in a smaller space for political communication on Facebook. According to the FB Team, the platform's democratic potential has therefore decreased. However, this statement most likely covers concerns about the FB Team's ability to attract attention to the EP Facebook page. This demonstrates that in today's commodified public discourse attention is indeed perceived as the "hard currency" for political actors (Aagaard 2016, 7; see Ch. 3.2.1.).

Moreover, several interviewees criticise that Facebook's algorithms give more space to populism and anti-democratic propaganda that could level out democratically valuable information such as from the EP. In that context, especially Facebook's filter bubbles are seen critically:

I think it is also dangerous because as we have seen those simple messages seem to get the more attraction. The more simple and attractive for people you make it, the more people are going to listen to it. And the more you can show people that their best interest would be served in listening to you, they want to believe you, they want to listen to you. ... They will think: "Well, yes, must be true, because all my peers agree with that person. I will too. (FT3)

These critical accounts of the impact of social media on the public discourse show that the interviewees are indeed also aware about potential risks that derive from the decreasing power of traditional media in the public sphere. The facilitation of populism and extreme ideologies as well as the creation of filter bubbles leading to an isolated construction of knowledge and a fragmentation of the public debate have been confirmed in different studies (Awan 2016; Essenger et al. 2017; Jabubowicz 2018; Rader & Gray 2015; Silva et al. 2016; see Ch. 3.1.)

Through this criticism, the collective optimistic stance towards technology is relativised. However, as mentioned earlier, there are interpersonal discrepancies or disagreements concerning the risks of Facebook's algorithms. The Head of Unit, who in general expresses the most optimistic stance towards social media, refutes the critique of algorithmic power:

Facebook and democracy – it is the same as the relationship between media and democracy: It is a place where people can express and debate and be informed. So, it is not a threat: I think it helps people to be confronted with different opinions. I do not believe in the bubble phenomenon at all.

All interviewees however agree that communication on Facebook can have a lasting impact on our societies. Facebook is characterised as "powerful" (FT5; CFT), the platform as a "very strong tool" (FT2) to influence the public discourse. One interviewee points out Facebook's impact in the US Presidential Election 2016, "If it was and is so important for the American democracy, then it is for us as well." (FT6).

The comparison with the US Presidential election is interesting because the influence of Facebook was broadly perceived as negative, including the ideological polarisation through echo chambers (Spohr 2017, 155f), the prevalence of fake news (Silverman 2016) and the manipulation of the public online discourse by bots (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017, 212). Yet, the author uses it in a neutral way to describe Facebook's growing role in the public discourse, implying that Facebook can also be powerful when used for democratic purposes. The statement hence entails a techno-deterministic notion, which assumes that technology is essentially neutral and its impacts on society depends how it is used (Hess 2015, 122).

The techno-deterministic notion is not reflected in all but in most of the interviews. This can also explain why the interviewees ascribe the responsibility for Facebook's impact on the society – good or bad – to the citizens rather than to Facebook's algorithmic business model:

I think that we have to learn as users to be very careful about what we are reading on social media. That is important nowadays because we have proof that there are many fake news around that can give wrong impressions and information. They can affect, I mean really affect our lives, the way we are thinking and our attitudes towards very critical and important issues. (FT2)

The obligation “to learn to be careful” indicates the viewpoint that users have the responsibility to use social media in a way that conforms with democracy – because “democracy has rules as all” (FT2). Those include “to check if it is true or not”, “to respect ... other people” and “to not use social media for the wrong purposes” (FT2). The same interviewee adds that social media companies should put more effort into detecting and eliminating fake news, thus pleading for the self-regulation of the industry. At the same time, another interviewee does not show a lot of trust in Facebook's will to design its platform in a more democratic way: “So I do not necessarily see Facebook as the most democratic platform because in the end of the day it is still a commercial platform, a business” (FT3). Indeed, literature has shown that all Facebook's affordances serve most of all its own interest (Hoffmann 2018, 202). As presented in Chapter 3.1.1., together with other social media companies it has for example refused the introduction of regulations and user protection rights to secure its business model, which builds up on attention maximisation (Apprich 2015, 139; Taplin 2017, 4).

The interviews show that FB Team's collective view on the communication platform Facebook is differentiated, including conflicting perception of its democratic potential. Most importantly, however, the FB Team members are aware of Facebook's algorithmic business model and the challenges it creates for the democratic public sphere.

*Facebook as a tool – a pragmatic view*

Despite the perceived risks the platform Facebook might pose to the public discourse in general, the FB Team's notion of Facebook *as a tool* for the institutional communication is predominantly positive. However, the interviews entail two narratives of Facebook centring on this notion, which are used to justify different aspects of its use for institutional communication.

The first narrative depicts Facebook as an opportunity. According to this narrative, in times of changing media consumption behaviour Facebook offers the possibility to enhance European democracy and to increase the voter turnout. This is because Facebook can help to provide citizens with information and offers unprecedented functions to motivate citizens to engage with its content, such as polls, graphics and videos. Through the network effect, information about the EP can be disseminated to a large audience. This includes people, who are not interested in the EU or politics, as well as those, who cannot afford newspapers. According to the interviews, with Facebook the FB Team is hence able to reach people that could not be reached through traditional media. Moreover, Facebook can connect citizens with civil servants and MEPs and empower citizens to execute their political power as constituency and voters.

Next to this optimistic view of Facebook, the interviews display a second, more negative narrative concerning Facebook: one of a space characterised by competition for attention and visibility. According to the Chair of the FB Team, Facebook “was a new development or an opportunity maybe back in the 2000s, I think now it is just one of the standard tools”. So, according to the competition narrative, the shift in media consumption to social media and its rapid growth has rendered the presence on the platform into a necessary promotional tool for all public actors, including politicians, institutions, companies and even the media.

While in 2009 the EP was one of the first political institution worldwide to join Facebook (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012a, 38f), today's necessity to be on the platform has resulted in a competition for visibility, which the interviewees often describe with gaming vocabulary: The struggle for attention is a “game” (HU; FT5) in which the algorithms are the “rules” (FT5) with which help to “compete” (FT3) and to “stay on top” (FT2). Facebook's algorithms are hence interpreted as the key to success and the main directive of each communicative action. Therefore, it is perceived as a nuisance that the company regularly changes its algorithms. Because the US company has power over the EP's visibility on Facebook, the FB Team is, as the following analysis will show, dependent on cooperation and a good relationship with Facebook.

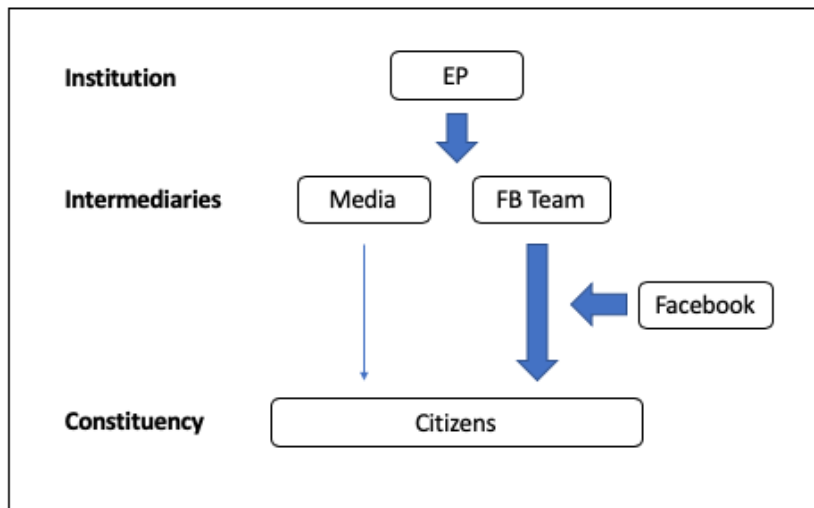
The differentiated view on Facebook as a working tool can explain the FB Team's pragmatic attitude regarding the platform: Facebook is described as the "first big social network" (FT6) not only in general, but also for the EP, which makes it the "flagship of the social media platforms" (HU). Today Facebook is still the most important social medium for the EP because it is the "best platform to reach the biggest number of citizens" (FT6). At the same time, Facebook is seen as one of many social media companies. Its position is unstable and dependent on two factors: The first variable is changes to the platform's algorithm. As mentioned above, a change that gives "less space to [public] pages and more to personal friends" (FT5) is perceived as decreasing Facebook's relevance for the EP. Due to the large potential audience, however, there is a general willingness to adapt to different algorithm changes. Most of all, the benefit of Facebook for the FB Team is dependent on the second variable, media consumption behaviour of citizens. According to the interviewees, Facebook has been attracting more older people, while younger people increasingly migrate from Facebook to the photo sharing platform Instagram, which makes Facebook less relevant in communication directed at young people. There is moreover a "tendency to go to more one-to-one communication platforms like WhatsApp or Snapchat" (FT4), further decreasing Facebook's importance. The interviews reveal a pragmatic view on the FB Team's own Facebook use:

Facebook ... is a tool. It is not the real world, it is not everything. It is not that everything that happens on Facebook is the only reality ... . No. Facebook is one of the many tools, a very strong tool, where we can express our opinions, where we can have a say, we can communicate easier, we can communicate our ideas as well to a big, big audience faster and easier. (FT2)

All in all, the view on Facebook is highly differentiated: While it is seen as a means to access information and enter a political debate, the problems of Facebook for the social discourse in general are acknowledged. While according to one narrative, Facebook is an opportunity to interactively engage citizens with EP issues, the second narrative depicts Facebook as a channel of communication characterised by necessity, competition and dependency. The necessity to sustain a Facebook profile, the competition for visibility and dependence on algorithms. Thus, the take on Facebook is mostly instrumental: Its popularity makes its use necessary, but if its effectiveness as a communication channel to reach the target audiences shrinks, the communicators will concentrate their efforts on other platforms. While it is the most successful social media platform of the EP, the relationship to Facebook is characterised by pragmatism rather than a conviction for its deliberative potential or emotional attachment. The general description of Facebook can be grasped as a powerful tool to communicate with EU citizens.

### 5.1.6. The Facebook Team – civil servants and communication experts

According to the positioning triangle's analytical framework, the positions of all actors are indefinitely linked (Harré & Maghaddam 2003, 9). Thus, based on the narrations concerning the EP, the media and public speakers, the citizens and Facebook, the position of the FB Team comes into being. Based on the aforementioned narratives, it can be concluded that the role of the FB Team is to replace or substitute the weak link created by the media between the EP and the EU citizens. In addition, the negative narratives concerning the EP put forward by journalists and public speakers can now be countered in a direct communication with citizen on Facebook. Necessarily, this communication is mediated by the platform provider's algorithms.



**Figure 3:** Positions of relevant actors in the public discourse and direction of influence

Unsurprisingly, the interviews show that the most important source for the FB Team's self-positioning is their status as civil servants which makes the institution EP and the citizenry their two most important stakeholders. Thus, all interviewees believe that they have certain duties in terms of services to EU citizens, but also towards the EP. As to be expected, the responsibilities as civil servants in the communication of the EP entail those which according to the literature are commonly ascribed to Western institutional communication, such as following the principles of transparency, neutrality, objectivity, factuality and will thus not be discussed in detail. But while the role as EU civil servants is a static one and can only define the foundations – the opportunities and limitations – of the FT Team's work, only the analysis of its fluid position can give insights into its scope of action.

Apart from civil servants, the FB Team defines itself as communication experts. This identification is legitimate as all interviewees have a background in communication studies and most of them have worked in communication positions before joining the EP. This finding indicated a trend of professionalisation in the EP's DG COMM as in 2004 a study on EP OPs displayed a lack of media competences and communication backgrounds in DG COMM (Anderson & McLeod 2004, 915). Another indicator is given by the amount of training the FB Team is given, which are next to "public speaking training" (FT3) the following:

We have training throughout the year: We had a video training for producing Facebook videos. I know that some of our colleagues were in Geneva last week for an Instagram training. We had other training sessions, for example we met a guy from Aljazeera in the autumn to discuss and exchange views to what Aljazeera is doing on Facebook and what we are doing on Facebook and we would meet people, I mean we have a relationship with people, from all of the major platforms. (FT3)

The promotional professionalisation of the EP's Facebook communication is also reflected in the semantics used by the interviewees to describe their daily work. The marketing-driven approach to their work becomes clear when several interviewees describe their work with economic terms. While a private company aims for "an increase in the purchase of goods or services (...), [we are] trying to shift to a pro-European mindset" (FT3). An almost identical statement is issued by another team member: "We all are trying to sell something. A private company is trying to sell a product, we are trying to sell ideas." (FT5). The Chair of the FB Team offers a longer explanation for the comparison.

We are not making any commercial profit. That is the difference between us and private companies. That is the only difference I think because we aim at more or less the same targets. We try to display our products in the easiest and most engaging way. They are selling products and we are selling the idea of the EP and voting in the elections. (CFT)

The difference between corporate promotion and institutional promotion is hence reduced to the product that it sold. As the quotes show, the products the FB Team's is promoting are support for the EU, awareness of the EP, and voting in the European elections. This makes clear that while the EP's Facebook communication is not aimed at generating commercial profit, its objective is to mobilise power resources in form of votes and legitimacy. As presented in Chapter 3, institutional communication always aims to establish a narrative of legitimacy and mobilise support of the constituencies (Price 2012, 11; Valentini 2006, 81).

With the expressed aim to commit Europeans to EU cause, the FB Team is clearly in charge of a promotional EU campaign, which in the literature is understood as "activities (...) which aim



at informing and promoting the EU cause among citizens” (Valentini 2006, 80). The identification as experts shows that the interviewees indeed identify themselves as “promotional intermediaries” (Davis 2013, 2) rather than just civil servants. The interviews hence vividly demonstrate the rise of promotional culture also in Europe’s political sphere.

According to the Head of Unit, as with a corporate enterprise, promotional goals can be achieved through “work[ing] on the branding, the reputation and everything that is connected to branding, which is tonality, perception and so on” (HU). Unsurprisingly, the duties deriving from the FB Team’s status as civil servants, such as neutrality, objectivity and factuality (Valentini & Laursen 2014, 5), are often conceived as limitations or restrictions for the promotional communication. This is expressed through comparisons with private companies who are perceived to have more freedom: “We do not sell shoes and we cannot twist the message as we want. We have to be clear and transparent” (FT6). Also, the quest for more creative freedom is explicitly expressed, for example through the request for an increased use of humour (FT3).

The interviews show that the scope of action of the communication experts is restricted through institutional externalities as the administrative and political authorities have the power over the general strategic orientation of the institutional communication. These are referred to as ‘others’, which expresses internal hierarchy: “When there are decisions made in this house, *they* listen [to us]” (FT5, own emphasis). The FB Team thus operates under a restricted autonomy and need to actively convince authorities to push through changes in the work procedures. A quote by the Head of Unit illustrates the limited influence over general questions:

[T]he political authorities of the EP have decided that we should be pro-EU; we should be more in favour of the EU, not remain neutral because then we do not send the right signal, which is something we have been asking for years in this Unit, so we are really happy with that. (HU)

While the administrative authorities from DG COMM such as Director-General Jaume Gauche are however depicted as benevolent, the interviews indicate the FB Team perceives the political authorities in a hostile way. As they additionally have the power over the budget and thus the resource distribution within the administration, they are even perceived as an existential threat to their work places:

I think it [the social media training for the MEPs] is [...] part of our offer and what makes us relevant as well inside the EP. Communications is in my opinion the first job where people make cuts because they think everyone can communicate and open their mouth and say something. (FT3)

Again, the findings are similar to earlier findings, which found that the EP communication officials feel not sufficiently appreciated (Anderson & McLeod 2004, 910). Moreover, the quote shows, the performance pressure under which the FB Team operates: They need to prove its relevance to the political authorities in order to be sustained. Their success can be indirectly measured: “So we cannot show a spike in sales. We cannot even show a spike in voter turnout immediately, because the elections take place every five years” (FT3).

In sum, the FB Team defines itself as a working group of communication experts whose task it is to promote the EP and the EU. The fact that the EU, as a whole, is included in the FB Team’s promotional activities differs from findings resulting from interviews with EP press officers in by Laursen and Valentini (2015, 36). They found that the EP officials exclusively work in the image of the citizen representation. This can be explained with the shift in the general outlook of DG COMM’s communication strategy mentioned above. The restricted scope of action due to the need to comply with normative standards of Western institutional communication together with the performance pressure within the institution can explain the economisation of the communication.

#### **5.1.7. Desired position – a publicly acknowledged European Parliament**

The positioning analysis has shown that the FB Team sees the EP as a powerful democratic actor. It is however misrepresented by the media and public speakers, leading to citizens’ lack of awareness and participation. The changing media consumption behaviour of the EU citizens has thus opened a window of opportunity for the EP to communicate the importance and benefits of the EP to citizen and to bypass the reluctant intermediaries. Because Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Europe, it has been adapted as a communication platform and a responsible working group in the unit WebComm was created. The FB Team identifies itself as communication experts. In their aim to convey a positive image of the EP and the EU to the public, they however underlie normative restrictions derived from their statuses as civil servants and a pressure to perform from within the institution.

This leads to two conclusions in regard to the desired positions: The desired position for the EP is to be perceived as politically competent and beneficial for the EU citizens. The assumption is that once public awareness about and a positive public image of the EP as well as a pro-EU mindset in the citizenry are created, the citizens are motivated to vote in the European

elections. It is the FB Team's job to contribute to these goals. Because the desired positioning of the FB Team is to be perceived as relevant within the institution, it can be concluded that the FB Team's objective is to promote the EP and the EU as efficiently as possible. With this in mind, in the next section the analysis of the Facebook campaign will be conducted.

## **5.2. Speech act analysis**

According to the positioning triangle, after having defined the positioning of the relevant actors, the so-called speech acts, so actions, to reach the desired positions can be analysed. Each speech act is given meaning by a narrative, which offers a certain interpretation of the actions. The task of the researcher is to uncover the "illocutionary force" (James 2011, 102), the difference of what is being said and what is being done.

In the following, the most important elements of the EP's institutional communication will be analysed. With the goal to assess which democratic value the EP's Facebook communication is having, the speech acts as well as alternative interpretation of the meanings are discussed.

### **5.2.1. "Being where the people are"**

The first element of the EP's communicative strategy on Facebook that was described in the interviews is the adaption of Facebook a communication channel. An interviewee explains, "[c]ertain basics are always true with communication. Your starting point has to be the public: rather to know where they are rather than what you want to say" (FT2). According to the FB Team, citizens have moved from offline media to social media:

How many average European citizens wherever they are from are just going to consult the press releases on the EP website? None of them will do that. That is why we have to be on social media. (FT4)

Being on social media is hence "being where the people are" (HU; FT2). This phrase was repeated several times during the interviews, especially by the Head of Unit. It also appears on the EP's webpage: "[w]e try not just to attract readers, but to be where the people are".<sup>11</sup> It can hence be perceived as the unofficial motto of the FB Team. A closer look at its components

---

<sup>11</sup> Parliament on social media. Retrieved on 2019, February 13 from, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/stay-informed/social-media>

reveals the message it aims to convey. First, the verb “to be” illustrates the possibility to be in the same space at the same time, which allows for a connection between the EP and citizens. The verb also draws a line to traditional media where citizens cannot “be”; instead, they passively consume its content. The motto hence signals equality and gives the impression that the FB Team, representing the EP, communicate with citizens symmetrically. At the same time, the phrase implies that the civil servants are willing to adjust to the citizens: The team is the dependent variable, the citizens are the independent variable.

As described in Chapter 3, orientation on the wishes of the target audience is common in today’s promotional communication culture (Davis 2013, 21ff; Marwick & boyd 2010; Serazio 2013). Moreover, Aagaard (2016, 8) claims promotional professionals often advocate horizontal power relations, symmetrical communication and reflexive dialogue between the institutions and the constituency through social media. However, the aim is to generate legitimacy for the institution, while asymmetrical power relations will stay the norm. That is indeed also the case for the EP’s FB Team will be discussed in more detail later.

Facebook is important for the EP as it is the most popular network in Europe. According to one interviewee “the percentage of people not on Facebook is really small” (FT6), which is why the audience on Facebook is perceived as being more or less equal to EU citizens: The target audience is thus “everyone” (HU) or the “general public” (ibid). This differentiates Facebook from other social media such as Instagram and Snapchat, which have younger and more homogenous audiences. This view is shared by CEO Zuckerberg (as cited in Hoffmann et al. 2018, 207), according to whom Facebook is for “people of all ages and all countries”. However, several interviewees remark that as younger audiences increasingly leave Facebook, its audience gets older. Nevertheless, Facebook is the most important social network site because at the moment it serves the FB Team to reach its target group. This becomes clear when the Head of Unit says: “We know that most of the voters are on Facebook” (HU).

To conclude, the WebComm civil servants employ social media in general and Facebook in particular to reach Europeans through their favourite communication channels. At the same time, they justify the use with the possibility to directly connect with the citizens and communicate with them on one level. Until now, the analysis does not yet entail information how and if this possibility is used. What stands out, however, is that Facebook has not actively been chosen for its democratic potential, to create a pan-European public space or the wish to receive citizen feedback.

### 5.2.2. “Informing the citizens”

According to the interviews, the most important element of the FB Teams daily work is informing citizens by creating transparency about the EP’s work on Facebook. It is often reasoned with the interviewees status as civil servants, which makes informing the citizens a duty.

I think [social media] is becoming more important because when you are a political institution you represent people and you are funded by people, so you have to communicate with them. So, you have an obligation to explain your work and to show what you are doing. So, social media is important because how people get information is really important. (FT2)

As the quote shows, it is thought that Facebook gives the EP communication officials a unique opportunity to adjust to the media consumption habits of the citizens and reach them with information. This is reasoned with the decreasing popularity of other communication channels such as the media or conventional websites. According to the Head of the Unit, Facebook is today’s main source of information because it “replaced the website (...) [and] became a point of reference for people” (HU). Thus, informing citizen on Facebook is part of the narrative that frames Facebook as a tool to enhance European democracy.

Each post is aimed to present citizens with new information bringing “added value” to their lives (HU). The posts inform readers about legislation, the parliamentary schedule and the day-to-day work of MEPs during the week and also on the weekends. On special occasions, posts can also touch upon affairs in the member states, for example the impairment of the rule of law in Poland or Hungary or the anniversary of the restoration of Latvia and Lithuania, and crisis events such as terrorist attacks. Each post includes a URL to more detailed information.

According to the FB Team simply making information available is not enough to increase the citizens’ awareness about the EP. This is because on Facebook different organisations compete for attention, which results in an abundance of information in the citizens’ newsfeed. Hence, the FB Team needs to adjust its communication to the attention economy: First, the Facebook presence has to be active and up-to-date. One interviewee explains that “if you have a social media account you always have to be visible. People have to see there is updates, so that it is worth coming back” (FT2). Secondly, due to the perceived passivity and lack of interest of citizens, the FB Team needs to “sweeten the pill” (FT2). According to the Chair of the FB Team, marketing techniques are an important part of catching the attention of the uninterested audience, especially for topics with a lack of ability to attract attention or are “not very sexy”. Each post therefore makes use of the tools that Facebook offers to engage people with the

editorial content such as cute, funny or emotive graphics, videos and polls. The FB Team also posts “a lot of animating content, just to sustain the community” (HU).

That the EP Facebook page features funny graphics has been already recognised by Vesnic-Alujevic (2012a). Her conclusion that these posts are primarily directed at young people is however incorrect since the FB Team specifically states that the Facebook users are increasingly old. Instead, it is thought that the Facebook audience is less educated and wants “fun content” (FT4) while the audiences on the more political or business oriented social networks Twitter and LinkedIn are interested in detailed and complex issues (FT5; FT4).

I see from the statistics of the organic posts that they do not really like to click [on the URL to more information] or do more. So, those who are interested will maybe click on the link, but I know that the key message will be in the post or in the video because the Facebook users do not really like to go further. (CFT)

The quote shows that the URL to more detailed information mainly serves as a carrier medium for the promotional campaign to commit EU citizens to the EU cause. This is done by informing people in simple, short and appealing messages about the benefits of the EP and the EU. While the FB Team hence actively tries to sell a pro-EU mindset to the people, the obligation to inform citizens serves as a justification for all the promotional campaign. The campaign which is based on the use of funny graphics and content tailored to Facebook users’ needs can also be considered as part of the image management, which according to Valentini 2006 (83, 88) is crucial to generate citizen support. It hence can be concluded that the narrative that frames Facebook as a communicative space where different public organisations compete for attention is used to justify the promotional campaign on the EP Facebook page.

### **5.2.3. “Calling for action”**

The third speech act is engaging citizens online with the EP’s content, for example through inciting discussions. From the perspective of the normative theory of public sphere as well as from theories about the democratising power of the internet, the FB Team’s approach to the political pan-European discussion on the EP Facebook page is important. Even though the Facebook communication is first of all a promotional rather than an informational campaign, inciting a pan-European discussion amongst citizens could be assumed to be a part of such a campaign as it could foster a dialogue about European issues (Vesnic-Alujevic & Nacarino 2012a, 68; Meriläinen & Vos 2010, 2).

In regard to the EP Facebook page, the Chair of the FB Team states: “We are all about engagement“. Indeed, every post contains a call for action which can vary from calling for indirect participation such as “like if you agree” as well as for direct participation such as “comment what you think”. The interviews show that inciting a pan-European discussion amongst the citizens on Facebook is not the aim of creating engagement. Instead, it is something that the FB Team “can use in different ways“ (CFT).

The first strategic goal of creating engagement, as the interviews show, is the network effect which comes into being through Facebook algorithms: If users react to a post, the article spreads through their personal networks and reaches more citizens, including those who do not follow the EP yet and the FB Team “would not reach otherwise“ (FT5).

(...) it is more valuable for me when they leave a comment or when they share the post with their friends. And shares and comments: First of all, we have the secondary audience that we gain through them interacting this way, because if they share their friends and family will see the post. The same happens when they comment. When it is a like, it is not so easy to get secondary audiences. (CFT)

The analysis hence shows, the FB Team tries to accumulate its social capital by making use of the network effect or the “richer get richer”-effect (Apprich 2015, 133; Van Dijck 2013, 17): Through employing connective action, thus the personalised content sharing of its followers on Facebook, the FB Team can reduce the costs and coordination for achieving a public outreach (Bennett & Segerberg 2012, 748). Thereby it essentially exploits the people’s wish to express and share personal concerns, hope or ideologies in their personal networks (ibid, 743). Connective action also makes the message credible because it reaches people through their personal networks. As such, the credibility is different from for example paid advertisement by the institution itself. As mentioned earlier, the FB Team also works together with influencers, who volunteer as EP ambassadors (FT3). In that case too, the authenticity and the social capital of the opinion makers are commodified through the network effect.

Both, distribution and credibility, are important to give the EP visibility in the competitive social media environment, which makes the network effect the central mechanism of the EP’s Facebook communication strategy. Hence, the FB Team employs a grass-root strategy common for institutional promotion with which the narratives disseminated with the posts can be spread all over the European networked public sphere on Facebook (Price 2012, 12; see Ch. 3.2.2.). However, despite of gains in audience reach and credibility achieved through the network effect, the actual quality of reach can hardly be measured (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012a, 36).

The discussions that take place on the EP Facebook page are valued by different interviewees to different degrees. For one interviewee for example, a discussion under an EP post has a normative value as it “implies that people are conscious of the world they live in and how they can change it” (FT3). Another one expresses the most scepticism about the deliberative value of the comment section:

But let us be honest: If you look into our comment section, a lot of it is rubbish. I do not know if I should describe it as such, but it is. We see situations where you just have people commenting rubbish that is unrelated to the EP, its work or the post. (FT4)

The FB Team’s ambivalent attitude towards online discussions contrasts the description of Facebook as a public space where everybody can have a say. The gap between theory and descriptive reality that the interviews reflect uncovers a contradiction between the impression of the EP Facebook page as a discursive page for political discussion and the economised, promotional approached to their communication.

Instead of aiming to incite real deliberation amongst the citizens, the competition narrative is used to justify the quantitative approach to engagement which relies on the network effect to spread the EP’s posts through personal networks. The findings have shown that the FB Team is aware of Facebook’s algorithms and tries to avoid the “threat of invisibility” (Bucher 2012, 1175) caused by a lack of interaction. It can hence be concluded that the main goal of the EP’s Facebook communication is raising awareness of the EP’s benefits and creating a positive image of the institution through top-down communication while pan-European discussions but are mostly seen as a favourable by-product.

#### **5.2.4. “Offering a two-way communication channel”**

Social media companies, PR practitioners as well as some communication scholars argue that social media can connect citizens with political actors (Nielsen & Vaccari 2013, 2334; Davis 2013, 22). According to this view, they “encourage politicians to listen to citizens and act ethically” (Davis 2013, 22). However, the degree to which this connection that is established through institutional social media pages has an influence on the political decision-making process is often unclear (Hennen 2016, 39). It is hence important to find out if the EP Facebook page is used to provide top-down information or to collect citizen feedback as a form of e-consultation as the questions for the citizens’ opinions in the FB Team’s posts suggest.



Throughout the interviews, all interviewees stress that the EP Facebook page is a two-way channel. The notion, however, is used to refer to the direct information exchange taking place between the promotional intermediaries and citizens. When being asked about the political impact of the comment section of the EP Facebook page, the interviewees seem irritated: “We are not forwarding every single comment. To whom for example? To all the committees? No. This is up to them” (FT5). According to the Head of Unit, monitoring likes, shares and especially comments is one of the central benefits of social media communication: It allows you to “try to fit better the expectations“ and “to avoid bringing up subjects that nobody cares about because the context is not right“. Another interviewee confirms that “this is also a part of our strategy: It is not only about pushing the EP’s agenda, it is also about listening what matters in the daily life of the people and trying to show them that the EU is present in this as well” (FT5). Monitoring thus helps the FB Team to learn about people’s “daily preoccupations” (FT5) and create more content that is “interesting”, “useful” and “helpful” to the citizens (FT6). And “(..) it is part of what we have to communicate about the EP and what it is doing, so why not” (FT6). Topics from the EP agenda that “won’t work on the audience” (HU) are purposefully left out.

Even though creating engagement in general is framed as a promotional tool to help the EP Facebook page compete for visibility, the monitoring of engagement is largely framed as an opportunity to improve European democracy. The argument that higher responsiveness helps improve the democratic public sphere by giving citizens exactly the information they need is prevalent especially in the promotional industry itself (Davis 2013, 22f). Again, the FB Team’s self-identification as experts respectively as promotional intermediaries becomes clear.

From a promotional perspective, however, this adaption to the wishes of the audience has two crucial functions: First the data from the comments is used for a grassroots strategy to image management (Valentini 2006, 88). Calls such as “Tell us what you think!” are hence attempts to negotiate the values and actions that are presented to the public – not of the actual institution (ibid). Next to the number of interactions, citizens’ sentiments to different topics are important. Insights are used to evaluate both, the perception of certain topics and communication styles, and adapt them accordingly. The interviews hence show that the EP has professionalised its institutional communication in social media. Secondly, the goal is to offer subscribers content which they most likely interact with in order to profit from the network effect and generate user data that can be implemented in the image management. The findings hence show that the EP’s promotional intermediaries follow the same logic as the social media company Facebook

itself to draw attention to its Facebook page (Davies 2018, 637; see Ch. 3.1.1.). Naturally, also this political marketing strategy is justified with the competition-narrative.

#### **5.2.5. “Answering comments”**

According to the interviews, a part of hosting a two-way channel on the EP Facebook page is to reciprocally communicate with citizens. All interviewees stress that the FB Team regularly replies to comments, especially if the commentators ask questions about the EP.

It is a chance for us to talk to real people. Sometimes you have people asking questions in the comments (...). And then you come with information, simply a link, something that does not take you the whole day, maybe 20 minutes to get information and then reply and then you realise by their reaction that they are really grateful and that you actually brought something to someone, over there in a country far away. And this is where the essence of the job takes all the substance. Then you realise: Okay, as a civil servant I have been really useful to someone today. That is great. (FT5)

Due to the possibility of answering individual comments, Facebook is framed as an opportunity to connect with citizens from all over the EU and provide them with information about the EP. The interviewees stress, however, that their position as civil servants precludes them from discussing political questions on Facebook: “Political issues are for MEPs; we are civil servants, so we cannot say that this is good or bad, that is not our job” (FT2). Hence, replies to comments are limited to factual information about the EP:

We will try to respond to as many as possible and basically when we see that we can respond with facts and figures from press releases, from an article, from a report from a committee, from a statement of a rapporteur to a comment we will respond for sure to this comment. (FT5)

Instead, non-political comments that are complimenting the EP Facebook page are preferably answered to: “(...) sometimes we have nice and positive comments about our work and we always try to answer that” (FT6). The interviewee continues to explain that even if those do not ask questions, they would thank the author for the compliment (ibid).

The FB Team perceives the EP Facebook page first of all as promotional top-down channel with the option for the citizen to directly communicate with the authors. Taken together with the ambivalent attitude towards the discussions amongst citizens, this finding makes clear that inciting political debates on the EP Facebook page is not the aim of the communication officials. This is however conflicting with the calls for action, which specifically ask for the

opinions about legislation of the followers, on a page is in essence political and promotes a political pro-EU message. In fact, the opaque nature of EU citizen consultancy platforms has previously been criticised (Tomkova 2010, 281f; Walter et al. 2010), with Hennen (2016, 33) warning that the lack of transparency could destroy even more trust in EU institutions.

Replies to comments are moreover used as a tool in image management. The first one is the personalisation effect. One interviewee describes it as the following:

When someone says: “I hate this and I think this is stupid”, sometimes I reply: “We are sorry to hear that”. And even that sometimes can make people go “Oh, there is someone there. I hurt someone’s feelings.” (...) It is really a bit more powerful than you think because people assume that just because you are publishing with a logo and not with your own name that you do not care, but if you post as yourself – if you reply and make sure that people know that there is someone there replying and reading these comments – it can already help to make sure that you get this kind of more human interaction. (FT3)

Responsiveness should support the personalisation. As another interviewee highlights, the aim to “make sure that people feel that they are heard” (FT3), which according to Vesnic-Alujevic (2012a), is a necessary condition to lower political apathy. Research has shown that EU institutions have been notoriously perceived as impersonal (Meyer 2009, 1055). The image of the EP create on Facebook is hence aimed to counter that view: Through its funny graphics, interesting topics and responsiveness, the EP is given a character.

The promotional effect of replies to comments are however not only directed at individual citizens, but at the whole Facebook community. That is shown by the fact that inbox messages are dealt with by a bot. Moreover, Facebooks’ algorithms can be used to give favourable comments a more prominent position in the comment feed:

Because what Facebook does, it has top comments and if you as the poster react to comments, it automatically brings it up on top. So, with some trolls, the consideration is: Do you really want to make them visible by responding? (FT2)

Instead, “nice or constructive comments (...) are liked by the EP itself and they are brought up as value to the conversation.” (HU). Again, the grassroots strategy employs the citizens’ agency for institutional promotion. The gate-keeping power of the FB Team can be regarded critically as they decide which comments are valuable. Moreover, they use authentic comments written by private persons to distort the public opinion. The authenticity is also used when it comes to countering anti-EU or EU-critical opinions or correcting false statements in the comment

sections: “And sometimes I just wait to hear if followers themselves will correct him because I think it is better than for me to do it” (FT2).

To sum up, it can be established that the EP Facebook page is regarded as an interactive promotional channel, which connects citizens and the promotional intermediaries. Comments are encouraged not for the purpose of political deliberation, but to serve three crucial functions for image management: First, they spread the post through the commentators’ networks. Secondly, they are used as evaluative benchmarks in image management. Thirdly, positive comments can be highlighted by moving them on top of the comment feed, which makes the public opinion in the public space on the EP Facebook page seem more favourable.

#### **5.2.6. “Being a bridge to the politicians”**

While the notion of the two-way channel refers to communication between the FB Team and citizens, the study participants stress that they are “a bridge” to the politicians: By connecting citizens with the MEPs, the citizens can exercise real political influence through bottom-up communication on Facebook. In this regard, Facebook is framed as a democratic opportunity as it bridges the gap between constituency and power and facilitates participation in the EU’s political decision-making process. The Head of the Unit expresses it as the following:

We are here to inform so that the general public debates at least amongst itself. And then ideally a dialogue takes place with the institution or with a member of the institution, with a politician. We are just a bridge between the politicians and the citizens. We inform, so they have the elements to make a decision and have an opinion. We like the fact that they discuss amongst themselves, that is very interesting. But then rather than turning to us as an institution, they should turn to the politicians, which is why we organise those Facebook Lives and chats and try to valorise the work of the actors of this house because that is the real dialogue. (HU)

To establish the contact between the EU citizens and the MEPs, FB employs four different means: First, they forward commenting citizens with political questions that they cannot answer themselves to the webpages of the MEPs. The EP Facebook page features a section with links to the websites of all political groups and MEPs, although not very visibly. Providing this contact information is perceived as empowering the citizens, however, by enabling them, based on the provided information about the EP’s activities, to contact to the political decision-makers directly and express their opinions or concerns about it.

Secondly, the experts from the FB Team provide social media training to the MEPs. Such services are an established practice of DG COMM and also exist in the press unit (Anderson & McLeod 2004, 913). As established before, the FB Team sees the training as a main activity to stay relevant within the institution, which indicates that these services are more appreciated by the MEPs than the unit's central campaigns. Again, this supports findings by Anderson and McLeod (2004, 902), according to which "[m]any MEPs see themselves very clearly as the primary communicators with the electorate, with [DG COMM] being required largely to act as a facilitator".

In the training for the MEPs, the FB Team members review the politicians' individual Facebook pages and suggest improvements. It is seen as part of connecting citizens with the politicians, but also of raising the awareness of the EP in general and increasing voter turnout because while the EP already has a large audience, "a much bigger audience is actually the followers of the individual accounts on social media of the MEPs" (FT3):

The more people realise how the European institutions and politicians are important to their daily lives, to their actions, the more they will want to be involved in this, go to vote and have a say, the better will be their choices in the sense that they will be better informed. They will not simply vote for a name on the list, but for a programme, because they read it and correspond to what they want. I think it is our role to help MEPs to do this at its best because in the end it serves the interest of the citizens and that is what we are there for. (FT6)

Despite the pro-EU orientation of the institutional communication, one interviewee noted that social media services are not only offered to pro-EU MEPs, but also to Eurosceptic or anti-EU members (FT3). This again can be reasoned with the normative obligations of civil servants to be politically neutral and is certainly valuable in term of public deliberation, in which different opinions should be present.

Thirdly, the interviews reveal that occasionally the FB Team is asked by the EP's parliamentary committees to monitor the sentiment of the comments to selected, but usually "big, controversial" (FT4) topics. As examples, the interviewee mentions geo-blocking, which was an especially popular EP initiative, and an alleged kebab meat prohibition, which caused a public outrage (ibid). Another interviewee adds a parliamentary resolution on honey bees:

It could be that tomorrow there is a vote on bees and it is super controversial and we are asked by the people in this house or even by the Head of Unit what the tendency is on this is in the general public so that they know the tone to adapt to. So, we would go through the comments and say: "In general people are in favour. What we realised is that they are upset by this and this specific aspect. (FT5)

While monitoring comments certainly is an instance of bottom-up communication, it is questionable, if it has a political impact. With the stated goal of knowing which tone to adapt to, it seems more as a means of preparing crisis PR than collecting political input.

Finally, the communicators organise Facebook Lives with MEPs. These are live video broadcasted on Facebook and highlighted as part of the FB Teams work by almost all interviewees, indicating that the FB Team recognises these events as important. The format is one where the FB Team usually interviews individual MEPs while the citizens can post questions to the comment sections. Those questions are picked up by the moderator and answered live by the MEP. During my study visit, on 22.02.2018, a 36 minutes long Facebook Live with MEP Ana Gomes dealing with tax avoidance and evasion was broadcasted. The interview is still available on the EP Facebook page today and received all in all 583.002 views and 590 comments.<sup>12</sup> Facebook Lives are hence popular also amongst the EP's Facebook community.

From all of the activities that aim to connect the citizens with the European politicians, from a deliberatively perspective, Facebook Lives is most valuable as it connects politicians and citizens in a reciprocal dialogue – even though the FB Team has the gatekeeping power of which questions will be discussed. Moreover, it is not clear if the citizens' questions impact the politicians and how much the Facebook Lives are used by the MEPs as top-down information channel. Several interviewees express the wish to host more live interviews but point out the lack of available MEPs to participate in them. In addition, online comments that have not been picked up in the live videos are rarely answered.

We also invite the members to come and answer the comments on our page, but they do not have time to do that. They do that more on Twitter than on Facebook. We have been telling them for years that if we publish an interview with them, people will comment and maybe they have questions, so they should come back and answer the questions – but they do not do it. It does not fit their political time frame or so. (HU)

The findings show a similar mindset of the MEPs as in Anderson and McLeod (2004, 912), which indicated that MEPs generally do not pay much attention to DG COMM and prefer to manage their own communication with their constituencies.

In sum, the interviews show that “being a bridge” between citizens and political actors is thought of as using Facebook's democratic potential best. Indeed, especially Facebook Lives

---

<sup>12</sup> European Parliament on Facebook: Facebook Live with Ana Gomes. Retrieved February 21, 2019 from <https://www.facebook.com/europeanparliament/videos/10160258592455107>

can be considered as most democratically valuable in the EP's Facebook communication. As there is no evidence about the political influence on the political decision-makers, however, in sum the citizen's political impact through the EP Facebook page must be considered as small.

For the lack of political impact of the EP Facebook page, once criticism would be that the EP's official Facebook page does not promote direct contact to the MEPs more to empower the citizens. For example, instead of asking the citizens to give their opinions on the official EP page, their post could include calls to contact the local MEPs. That, however, would transfer internet traffic away from the EP page and contrast the aim to generate engagement. The current calls for action could however be perceived as slightly deceiving since the commentators might be under the impression that their political opinions are valued.

Moreover, it can be regarded critically that the FB Team does not attempt to expand the political impact of its work, for example by collecting citizen feedback without request. Most of the time, however, even consistently expressed citizen concerns are not forwarded:

It happens often that for good or for bad reasons people come on our page to express themselves about political difficulties, so if we think that there is enough substance in it, we try to inform the members. But it does not happen often – let us be honest. (HU)

Topics that were forwarded concerned “the Syria situation” (HU) and an EP initiative concerning stray dogs in Romania (ibid). In a similar instance, however, the comments are not forwarded: “We just ignore it” (FT4). This becomes clear by the following excerpt:

Sometimes we have campaigns against our comment sections. (...) And another example is the Catalan referendum: After the referendum, at the end of last year, a lot of people from Catalonia were commenting about the referendum on all of our post. We may have had a post on tax avoidance or agriculture policy or climate change, but people were on mass commenting on Catalonia. So, that happens as well. Another example: You have domestic issues that are really big in the individual member states. I know that at the moment homelessness is a huge issue in Ireland and you will see Irish people posting about homelessness regardless of what the post is. (FT4)

As the quote shows, comments that do not match the topic of the FB Team's post are perceived as campaigns against them. This is reasoned with the fact that these are domestic issues, which the EP has no competences in. However, it is likely that the citizens are not aware of that and turn to the EP because they consider it as having an influence on their national governments. Such political activism that reflects trust in and a positive image of the EP could be assumed to be valued more by the promotional intermediaries. This, however, shows that the bridge between citizens and political actors is not always open, at least not from the bottom to the top.

### 5.2.7. “Talking with Facebook”

The final action in this analysis is the purchase of services from the social media company Facebook. The interviews reveal that next to paid advertisement, the FB Team’s civil servants pay for training by different social media company officials to improve their performance, with Facebook being one of them. During these, they are informed most of all about upcoming algorithm changes and how to adapt the content to them so that it receives the highest visibility. Moreover, they touch upon how to improve the targeting of paid advertisement and give insights into the Facebook performance of other institutions.

While the previous speech act stood most of all in the light of the democracy-narrative, the final speech act in the communication of the FB Team is fully part of the competition-narrative. It reasons professionalised promotion with the high competition for visibility and attention on social media in various ways: First, the narrative is used to justify paid advertisement as the following quote shows:

(...) there is so little space left on social media and so many big people and companies are competing for it, so that you need a really well thought out paid strategy to make sure that you reach who you want to reach. (FT3)

Moreover, as “[t]he world of technology and social media is growing and developing rapidly” (FT5), the team “is in regular contact with Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram and so on” (FT3). One interviewee tells that as a member of the Twitter team, he “would have been on the phone with people at the Twitter headquarters almost every week or multiple times a week” (FT1). According to the Head of Unit, it is “important to stay connected with the platforms to know what they are recommending, what the evolutions are and then we stay ahead of the game”.

The FB Team’s strategy to gain visibility is to buy exclusive information about future algorithm changes from Facebook to anticipate the changes on the platforms and adapt their working methods to them. As the excerpt shows, Facebook’s algorithms have a direct impact on the allocation of financial resources within the unit WebComm:

“When we found out that Facebook promotes videos more, [the Chair of the FB Team] was able to tell [Head of Unit]: “We need more videos in the Facebook format.” Because that again has more repercussions on the way that we work as a team, how much resources are allocated to it and how much money is going to video production. If we can say that our videos will not only go on the website, but we are also able to use them for Facebook, that is an added argument to invest in video production.” (FT1)



Staying ahead is hence accomplished with the purchase of exclusive information about future algorithm changes. It is this timely advantage that the civil servants are paying Facebook for because after the algorithm change been implemented, the information is available for free:

“I mean in the internet they write about it, it is public information. But still it helps if you get the heads up from someone who is working for the company and tells you: “This is the stuff we are developing, this will be available in beta-testing in x months and then it will be made available.” (FT3)

The interviews reveal that the close cooperation with Facebook has another advantage for the FB Team as the company has helped the EP during the last European elections in directing attention to the European elections. The Chair of the Facebook explains that Facebook does these kinds of campaigns without financial compensation to work on its own image, which has suffered from several fake news scandals and hence seems confident that the company will support the EP’s cause in the 2019 elections again:

But Facebook as a company can also help and I hope they will help. Because what we do as the EP has limited power, but if Facebook does something as a company it has more power. In the previous elections, they had the ‘I voted’-button for everyone who participated in the voting and if they wanted to share it on their page, they activated this button. This had a way higher reach than we would have on the election day. (...) Let us see what they want to do for the [upcoming] European elections. (CFT)

As the quote shows, the Chair ascribes the company Facebook a considerable influence on the voter turnout in the European elections. The close cooperation with Facebook and other social media companies is hence justified by the need for visibility in the main channel through which the European citizens supposedly receive their information. The findings support the normalisation hypothesis, according to which the internet will reproduce the unequal power distribution from the offline world. As a big tax-funded institution, the EP is able to buy information that is crucial for the success of the institutional promotion in advance and allocate its resources accordingly. Like this, it has a clear advantage in competing with other institutions that do not have these financial means. The competitive attitude is reflected in the fact that information about the performance of their competitors is included in the Facebook training. On behalf of the FB Team, it is perceived as “very useful for us to talk to people who are working with other institutions and compare ourselves to them” (FT3).

Facebook’s business model, which is based on regular algorithm changes, has hence created a dependency of the EP on Facebook: In order for the EP to have more visibility and more attract attention than other public actors, they need to cooperate with the company. Facebook is

willing to do so, not only because the company gains revenue through the training, but also because it has a genuine interest that the EP is creating user engagement on the platform – because as established in Chapter 3.1.1., “[i]n the Facebook assemblage, a useful individual is the one who participates, communicates and interacts” (Bucher 2012, 1175).

From an ethical perspective, the transfer of the EU citizens’ tax money to Facebook can be critically discussed, especially considering past and presents conflicts between the company and the EU or single member states. The distrust of the EP in the company was expressed as shortly after the interviews, on 22. May 2018, three days before the EU’s new general data protection regulation (GDPR) came into force, Facebook CEO Zuckerberg was invited to the EP Conference of Presidents.<sup>13</sup> There, he was questioned by MEPs and talked about hate speech and fake news on Facebook, the platform’s algorithms, the company’s data protection as well as its approach to competition and taxes, amongst others – all areas, in which Facebook has been criticised. One can assume that for the EP is concerned, especially given the manipulation of the US Presidential elections through fake news, bots and the misuse of user data by the political marketing company Cambridge Analytica. The FB Team financially supporting Facebook is hence in essence unethical, even though it is justified by the need for visibility.

On the other hand, during Zuckerberg’s questioning, the Facebook CEO also highlighted that protecting upcoming elections in European member states as well as for the European Parliament is one of his priorities. The EP administration can use that as another argument for its good relation to Facebook: While the political part of the EP critically scrutinises the company and builds up leverage, the FB Team negotiates the benefits that Facebook is willing to grant to the EP as a consequence, such as the “I voted”-button.

In the past, several authors have pointed out that today public actors have to adapt their communication to the operational parameters of social media platforms (Davis 2013, 196; Taplin 2017, 17). Taken together, the findings support the critical theorist Allmer (2015, 20) who argues that “there is an asymmetrical relationship between economic, political, and cultural actors in the process of the technological movement of the productive forces with a predominant and powerful position of the economy”.

---

<sup>13</sup> Answers by Mark Zuckerberg, Founder and CEO of Facebook to the members of the EP Conference of Presidents. Retrieved on January 18, 2019 from [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/fi/answers-by-mark-zuckerberg-founder-and-ceo-of-facebook---ep-conference-of-presidents-with-mark-zuckerberg-founder-and-ceo-of-facebook-\\_I155824-V\\_rv](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/fi/answers-by-mark-zuckerberg-founder-and-ceo-of-facebook---ep-conference-of-presidents-with-mark-zuckerberg-founder-and-ceo-of-facebook-_I155824-V_rv)

### 5.3. Story line analysis

The research at hand asks for the FB Team's sense-making of their work. Based on the analysis of its interpretation of different actors (*positionings*) and actions (*speech acts*), the narratives (*story lines*) can be grasped. The first narrative concerns the FB Team itself and gives its work a meaning. The second narrative justifies the FB Team's work practices and communication on Facebook, in particular.

#### 5.3.1. Narrative 1: Empowering the citizens through information

The main narrative that goes through all the interviews is that the FB Team enhances European democracy by empowering European citizens on Facebook through knowledge about the EP's impact on their lives. In this way citizens become aware of the EP's political competences and mobilise to act upon their democratic right and political power influencing the European decision-making process. This can be done by discussing European matters, contacting their MEPs and, most importantly, by participating in the European elections.

The story line is consistent with the positioning of different actors: The EP, which is a powerful, democratic institution improving the lives of the citizens, is not acknowledged as such. The media and national governments are the villains who willingly deny citizens information for their own good, such as economic profit or scapegoating and need to be supplemented by the EP's web communicators. The MEPs, who are reluctant to publicly act upon their role as European citizen representative and do not understand the importance of professional communication, need to be supported as they communicate with their constituencies on behalf of the EP. The citizens, who are uninformed and passive, need to be actively approached with attractively designed information to be enlightened and empowered. Facebook, which is the favourite medium of citizens, offers a chance to reach them and helps the communicators gain visibility in a competitive space. The FB Team in its role as civil servants is fighting for the legitimacy of the EP and European democracy by acting as communication experts and successfully adapting to the citizens' preferences and generating popular interest in the EP. Through their expertise, they are relevant within the institution.

### 5.3.2. Narrative 2: Promotion for democracy

As pointed out above, two sub-narratives are used to justify the communicative actions with either of them reasoning different aspects of each speech act. While actions that aim at empowering citizens are often justified with a narrative that depicts Facebook as a democratic space, the analysis has shown that there is a strong promotional aspect in the Facebook campaign. This is mostly justified with a narrative revolving around competition for visibility on the online platform.

According to the democracy narrative, Facebook is an opportunity for the civil servants to reach citizens, especially those who cannot be reached through the media anymore, engage them with the EP in interactive ways for example through videos, funny graphics and polls to inform them that way about the EP. Being able to adapt to the audience wishes is hence part of the narrative. Facebook can also be used to establish a direct dialogue between citizens and their MEPs through Facebook Live videos.

The competition narrative says that in order to reach citizens and raise their awareness about the EP, political marketing techniques are needed in the competitive online space. Furthermore, in order to mobilise them to participate in the elections, the EP has to be presented in a positive light. Hence, the audience's wishes and needs have to be monitored and adapted to – in terms of information that is made available, tonality and style. Moreover, interaction has to be generated to stay visible on the platform and spread the EP's permanent campaign to secondary audiences, supplemented by paid advertisement. The narrative is also used to justify the most sensible part of the FB Team works, namely receiving training from and maintaining a good relationship with the company Facebook.

Each action can hence be said to have a democratic and a promotional aspect, while in different actions either one of the aspects is more prevalent: In Facebook Lives with MEPs, for example, the democratic aspect is dominant, in creating engagement, monitoring as well as the cooperation with Facebook, the promotional aspect is in the forefront. Adapting the communication to the wishes of the audience, however, is justified with both narratives to equal degrees.

According to the interviews, the two narratives do not exclude each other. On the contrary, the competition-narrative is supplementing the democracy-narrative: Promotional strategies are used to enhance European democracy. Both narratives can be incorporated through the FB Team's self-ascribed roles: they act as civil servants and communication experts at the same

time. The analysis hence vividly shows how the promotional culture has manifested itself in the political sphere.

#### **5.4. Positioning type, purpose and goal**

After having conducted the positioning, speech act and narrative analysis, remaining three dimensions in the analytical framework for strategic communication, the campaign type, purpose and goal of the campaign, can be defined. First, the campaign type which defines if a campaign has been taken up deliberately and defensively. Defensive campaigns are issued if “forces outside an organisation’s immediate control necessitate to position itself as [a certain] actor” (van Langenhove & James 2017, 13). As to the EP’s Facebook campaign, the findings include indicators for both. On the one hand, Facebook is also framed as an opportunity and the EP was one of the first political institutions worldwide to deliberately adopt a Facebook page in 2009. On the other hand, the analysis has shown that the low public awareness of the EP, the scarce media coverage, the critical assessment of the public speakers as well as the competition for attention amongst public and private organisation on Facebook are all used to reason the EP’s institutional Facebook communication. Most of all, however, the low voter turnout has made the institution vulnerable for criticism targeted at its legitimacy. Thus, it can be concluded that the EP’s Facebook campaign’s type is, at least today, is defensive.

Secondly, the analysis has shown that the purpose of the campaign is self-promotion. According to James (2011, 104) “entities that use self-promotion want to be seen as competent and emphasize abilities and accomplishments.” This is clearly the case for the EP and its communication officials and even directly stated so: The campaign’s objective is to raise the awareness about the EP, improve its public perception and promote a pro-European mindset. The self-promotion is moreover reflected in the campaign’s focus on past accomplishments, thus on the institution’s output legitimacy, in which it performs better than in the dimension of input legitimacy. Furthermore, a pre-selection of the information takes place which leads to the FB Team presenting the audience favourable with information that it reacts positively to. The last dimension is the Facebook campaigns’ strategic goal (ibid, 105). The analysis has shown that while in the middle-term the strategic goal is to increase the EP’s public image, the long-term objective is to increase the voter turnout in the European elections, and that way, the institution’s input legitimacy.

Taken together, the analysis along the last three analytical dimensions in the positioning approach for strategic communication has shown that the EP's Facebook campaign can be described as a defensive self-promotion campaign with the goal to increase the EP's legitimacy. In the last section of the analysis, this and previous findings are interpreted and critically discussed from the perspective of the European public sphere and deliberative democratic theory.

### **5.5. Discussion: A promotional campaign with democratic potential**

The aim of this study is to offer a critical contribution by discussing the democratic value of the EP's institutional communication on Facebook. From the viewpoint of deliberative democratic theory, the communication on the EP Facebook page has democratic potential because the page offers an inclusive space for all discussion participants, thus citizens and institutional actors, to debate as equals under the normative rules of reflexivity and rationality (Tomkova 2010, 274). In a normatively strict reading, deliberation differs from debate in the sense that it must be able to change the initial position of a given actor (Ivic 2017, 83). Facebook's deliberative potential can hence be used by the EP in two ways with varying ambitions: First, a two-way communication between the institution and citizen can be initiated. For the communication to count as deliberation it has to have a policy impact, otherwise it is just a debate. Secondly, it can be used to incite an online deliberation or a debate amongst the citizens on the EP's Facebook page, which eventually can foster a European participatory culture (Tomkova 2010, 287).

The analysis has shown that the EP's institutional communication on Facebook is most of all a promotional campaign. Neither inciting a deliberation between the institution and the citizens or a deliberation between the citizens is explicitly aimed for. The main aim is to deliver information. Because the Facebook audience is perceived as not suitable for in-depth information, instead the main purpose of the campaign is to raise the awareness about the EP amongst the citizens on Facebook and improve its public image. The political influence that the citizens can have through the EP Facebook page is minimal to non-existent. An exception are Facebook Lives interviews with MEPs broadcasted on the EP's page, in which the citizens can directly communicate with political decision-makers. Regularly, however, the EP's institutional communication on Facebook is a promotional top-down campaign.

A two-way channel of communication thus does exist, but only between the citizens and the EP communication officials. Mobilising citizens to comment is part of the feedback-based promotional strategy: On Facebook, likes, shares and comments spread the campaign through personal networks and improve the page's relevance in regard to the algorithms. Moreover, they can be used to adapt the content and tonality of the institutional communication to the wishes of the audience. If a deliberation amongst the citizen in the comment section takes place, however, it is rather seen as a favourable by-product of the promotional campaign.

As shown in Chapter 3.2.2., disseminating top-down messages through generating bottom-up communication is a common promotional strategy for political actors (Serazio 2013, 98). The findings hence confirm previous findings that Facebook users rather help political actors to achieve their promotional goals than working together with them on policies (Koc-Michalsk & Lilleker 2017, 1f). The EP's Facebook posts' calls for action, such as "Tell us what you think!" can be perceived as deceiving. The citizens might be under the impression that they are invited to a real deliberation with the political institution, which entails the notion that their political opinions are valued and registered (Ivic 2017, 83). In the words of Jenkins and Carpentier (2013, 271), they politically *participate* rather than interact. In reality, however, they join a "faux interactivity" (Koc-Michalsk & Lilleker 2017, 1) that supports the EP officials in their aim to spread the promotional message.

The EP communicators seem to lack this perspective. For them, the apolitical interpretation of a two-way communication channel seems to be natural and obvious. Indeed, on the Facebook page, the team acts openly in its role as communication professionals: When answering comments on Facebook, for example, they favourably thank compliments of their work. This can be explained by the FB Team's self-positioning: Because the consensual perception is that the media do not fulfil their job as a Fourth Estate in Europe and cover the EP, the FB Team needs to substitute the lack of coverage. As such, the civil servants act on the intermediaries level rather than on the political level. The EP communication officials hence identify as promotional intermediaries (Davis 2013, 1). The motto "being where the people are" means to them communicating to the citizens as equals. The promotional communication taking place on the EP Facebook page is hence not perceived as top-down but as symmetrical communication. This narration, however, leaves out that the political message, hence the pro-EU message, is disseminated top-down.

By substituting the media coverage, the civil servants see their role from the perspective of the European public sphere to offer citizens information about the EP. Interestingly, the analysis has shown that in the attempt to inform the public, the EP communication officials face the same restrictions as the media: The Facebook audience is perceived as neither informed nor interested enough to be presented in-depth information about the EP and the EU in general. While the media consequently simply reduce the EU coverage (de Vreese 2003), the EP web communicators reduce the campaign on Facebook to promotion based on colourful graphics and short, positive statements. On the elitist social media Twitter or LinkedIn, on the other hand, the EP's communication campaigns are more informative and educational, containing in-depth information. Interestingly, this gap between media with different audiences mirrors the gap in the news coverage about the EU between quality and regional or local media. The analysis along the positioning triangle is hence able to show that the varying attitudes towards the EU in the citizenry is not only a consequence of the consumed information about Europe. Rather, next to the lack of news values, the initial disinterest in the complex EU politics of some citizens plays a crucial role in the lack of communication about the EU.

Due to the promotional aspect, the information disseminated on the EP Facebook page must be regarded critically – despite the normative standards of objectivity, factuality and transparency the civil servants need to comply to: First, the Facebook campaign has a clear pro-EU outlook and thus carries a political message rather than neutral or objective information. Secondly, the feedback-based approach to image management results in a pre-selection of the information made available. Controversial and uninteresting topics are purposefully left out. While the FB Team, in accordance with representative of the promotional industries (Davis 2013, 22), argues that such an audience-targeted approach increases the interest in European politics, it can be argued that it attempts to create legitimacy based on a twisted truth (Aronczyk & Powers 2010, 11; Peter 2010, 5f). What the findings show is that the normative standards that civil servants need to comply define *how* information needs to be, namely factual and objective (Laursen & Valentini 2014, 5), but not *what* needs to be published.

All in all, it can be concluded that the deliberative potential is largely not used by the EP's Facebook team. The findings moreover demonstrate that for an informed public debate about European issues, critical scrutiny through trained journalists is essential (Sunstein 2017, 6f; Dahlgren 2018, 25). Social media communication, even when issued by democratic political institutions, cannot replace them. Yet, in the case of the EP, promotion and deliberative



democracy, do not necessarily exclude each other. Hennen (2016, 37) for example argues that even PR campaigns are a first step to create a European public sphere as they foster a pan-European audience. Moreover, as much as the civil servants' obligation to provide information about the EP to the public is a carrier medium for the pro-EU promotional campaign, the campaign is a carrier medium for information about the EP to the public. Each Facebook post must also include a link with in-depth information – it is the choice of the citizens to consume this information if it reaches them through their Facebook feed. In general, however, informing the public about the EP's political competencies and institutional agenda has the potential to mobilise the citizens to take part in a broader public debate which can eventually impact the EU decision-making process. In addition to that, the EP Facebook page itself hosts sporadic deliberative instances such as most importantly the broadcasted live interviews with MEPs.

Finally, the FB Team's lacking aim to employ Facebook's deliberative potential can be explained by the theoretical approach to democracy reflected in the interviews. As explained in Chapter 2, democratic theory has different traditions, with each of them ascribing the public sphere different function. This research has been embedded in the deliberative democratic tradition, in which the procedure of deliberation with popular inclusion legitimises political action. The approach to democracy reflected in the accounts of the EP communication officials on the other hand rather aligns with the liberal representative theoretical tradition.

The representative perspective on democracy considers the citizens as the ultimate source of authority and assesses democracy through the degree to which interests, values and attitudes in society are represented in the government (Ferree et al. 2002, 290f). It is hence vote-centric, seeing elections as the central momentum of democracy. The public sphere's most important function is to provide transparency about political actors' and their actions. Information is provided by experts is to equip citizens for future voting decisions. Direct participation of the citizens in the public discourse is accepted but not actively encouraged (ibid).

The representative approach to democracy seems to be characteristic for the EU's institutional culture: Stie (2013) found that the EP performs better in its role as a democratic legislator from the vote-centric rather than the deliberative perspective. Ivic (2017, 84) concluded that the Commission's *Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate* (2005), officially aiming to include citizens in the European decision-making, "establishes a very limited concept of the public sphere, which is perceived 'as an information-providing instrument'". In fact, previous studies on European citizen online consultation initiatives offline reported that there was no bottom-

up influence on the political decision-making (Tomkova 2010; Just 2010; Kies et al. 2013). Moreover, Tomkova (2010) as well as Friedrich (2013) showed that the European Commission's and EP's consultations involved most of all pre-selected organised interest groups and experts, which also fits to the representative approach where only citizens with expertise are actively included in the public discourse (Ferree et al. 2002, 292). Finally, the representative democratic theory stipulates that political decision of the authority do not need critical discussion after an election has taken place. In terms of legitimacy, it suffices "that a majority of legitimate, accountable representatives have decided on a particular policy" (Ferree et al. 2002, 294). This study's finding that the EP's Facebook communication particularly focuses on demonstrating the EP's benefits, and therefore its output legitimacy, fits well to this notion.

The European public sphere has been understood in this thesis as the communicative infrastructure to debate the legitimacy of the EU (Trenz 2009, 35). Considering this definition, it is questionable if the EP's institutional communication aligning representative approach can considerably contribute to establishing such a legitimising communicative space. Already the elitist nature of the mass media's EU news coverage, which rarely makes the citizens' interests visible to the EU governmental actors, has been connected to the lack of citizen support in the EU (Walter 2017, 765). The EP's institutional communication does not replace this missing link. While the EP's top-down promotional campaign can probably mobilise additional voters at election time by raising awareness about the EP, the institution's legitimacy crisis will most likely not be solved through a higher turn-out in 2019 alone. European elections take place only once every five years, but for the EU institutions to be perceived as legitimate and trustworthy institutions, it is important to foster a European participatory culture also apart from election times. For that, European matters must be comprehensively discussed in the European public, before they are voted on by the parliamentarians. In short: the citizens need to be given real power in the EU decision-making process. If this is not the case, their perceptions of democracy will stay limited to the national context and the European democracy deficit is likely to prevail.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has explored how the European Parliament web communication officials make sense of the institutional communication on the official EP Facebook page. The starting point of the research was the European Union's democratic deficit, which from the perspective of deliberative democracy can be explained with a lack of a European public sphere. For the EU governance's legitimacy, a critical public deliberation guiding governmental action is necessary. The question arising from the literature has been if the EP, hit by a decreasing voter turnout in the European elections, would make use of the deliberative potential of the social networking site Facebook and enter a dialogue with the European citizens to increase its legitimacy. The analysis was conducted based on data collected through participant observation in the EP's Web Communication unit and interviews with eight communication officials. With the help of the positioning theory, it was scrutinised how the officials perceive their strategic communication on Facebook as well as their role in the construction of a European public sphere. The aim of the study has been to offer a critical evaluation of the EP's institutional communication on Facebook based on the normative theory of deliberative public sphere.

The research findings have shown that despite the EP's legitimacy crisis, the EP officials largely do not make use of Facebook's deliberative potential. Instead, they aim to raise public awareness about the EP and convey a positive image of the EP and the European integration. The final objective is to increase the voter turnout in upcoming European elections. The EP's institutional communication on Facebook hence mainly serves the purpose of a promotional campaign. Even though the EP Facebook page occasionally connects EU citizens and the political authorities, the bottom-up communication from the citizens on the EP Facebook page has no systematic impact on the political decision-making process. Instead, it is used to improve and to disseminate the promotional top-down campaign. The findings therefore support the view that the narrative of social media connecting political actors and the citizens in online dialogues is mainly put forward by institutional intermediaries to legitimise their political promotion.

The study has also shown that, from the viewpoint of the EP web communicators, promotion is a necessary means to strengthen European democracy. The perceived compatibility of promotion and democratic communication is reasoned with the role the web communication officials claim from the perspective of the European public sphere: The EP web communicators see themselves as communication experts, who raise public awareness of the EP and inform

citizens about the parliamentary agenda. The argument is that with this information, the citizens can – and should – make use of the power they have in the political decision-making process on the EU level. Discussions or implicit forms of engagement on the EP Facebook page are incited with the aim to spread the promotional information campaign. The perceived legitimacy of this practice reflects a liberal representative understanding of European democracy rather than a deliberative understanding: Citizens need to receive necessary information to make informed decisions at election times; their participation in the public discourse on the other hand is not required.

In part, the findings reflect previous studies, which suggest that the liberal representative approach to democracy is prevalent within the EU institutions (Ivic 2017; Stie 2013). This study adds to these findings by exploring the question more qualitatively. In fact, the EU's web communicators' perspective has not been broadly explored yet. The research at hand, however, has been able to show how important it is to consider the sense-making of the institutional communicators in research into the European public sphere. By offering knowledge about the motivations behind the EP's Facebook communication, the qualitative findings can provide a basis for future qualitative and quantitative research on the social media communication of the EP.

This research is limited because it is based on only eight interviews. Its findings can hence not be generalised. Future research should thus have a broader empirical base and should also take into account the use of other platforms. Moreover, Martins et al. (2012, 306) assert that focusing on one institution is a crucial constraint in European public sphere research as it does not allow for conclusions about the differences between the EU institutions' approaches to communication. In order to get a more comprehensive picture of the motivation behind the EU social media communication, comparable qualitative interview studies in the web communication units of other EU institutions are needed. As the findings of this and previous studies suggest, that the MEPs see themselves as the main communicators to the European citizens, in further research also the political authorities' stance towards the institutional communication should be considered. After all, for deliberation to be perceived as a communicative exchange with the power to change the participants' initial stance on a topic, to take place through institutional social media communication, the cooperation of the MEPs and political committees is required. From another perspective, it would be interesting to explore between Facebook and European political institutions further. As the social media company currently stands under political pressure in the EU with several legislative acts limiting its scope of action, it will need

to show more social responsibility in the future. Thus, closer cooperation with democratic political institutions is likely to be sought after in the future.

After all the criticism, the question remains open how the deliberative potential of social media could be exploited by the EP. Here, the normative deliberative theory of public sphere serves as a useful evaluative instrument to deduct suggestions regarding how the EP can improve its institutional communication. In my opinion, a first step could be to create transparency about the purpose of the EP Facebook page. The citizens should know that the EP Facebook page has no systematic political impact but is open as a discursive forum for those who want to discuss with others. Secondly, instead of the retrospective approach to communication focusing on the EP's output legitimacy, it could inform citizens about parliamentary initiatives and agendas well in advance, so that they eventually still have time to contact their respective MEPs. Thirdly, and most ambitiously, the link between the web communicators and the political authorities within the institution could be strengthened. Instead of monitoring Facebook comments only upon request without the commentators' knowledge, public consultations on selected topics could be held openly. Giving citizens real influence in the political decision-making process would not only generate internet traffic and engagement on the EP Facebook page, but also give the EP the chance to take a lead in how to use social media in innovative and democratic ways. Finally, this could improve its image and increase its input legitimacy.

## Bibliography

- Aagaard, P. (2016). The Fourth Age of Political Communication. Democratic decay or the rise of phronetic political communication? *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*, 11(3), 1-17.
- Aday, S.; Farrell, H.; Freelon, D.; Lynch, M.; Sides, J.; Dewar, M. (2013). Watching from afar. Media consumption patterns around the Arab Spring. *American Behavioral Scientist*, XX(X), 1-21.
- Ahy, M. H. (2016). Networked communication and the Arab Spring. Linking broadcast and social media. *New Media & Society*, 18(1), 99-116.
- Allcott H.; Gentzkow M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211-236.
- Allmer, T. (2015). *Critical Theory and Social Media. Between emancipation and commodification*. New York: Routledge.
- Ampuja, M. (2012). Globalization Theory, Media-centrism and Neoliberalism. A Critique of recent Intellectual Trends. *Critical Sociology*, 38(2), 281-301.
- Anderson, P. J.; McLeod, A. (2004). The great non communicator? The mass communication deficit of the European Parliament and its press directorate. *Journal of common market studies*, 42(5), 897-917.
- Apprich, C. (2015). *Vernetzt – Zur Entstehung der Netzwerkgesellschaft*. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Aronczyk, M.; Powers, D. (Eds.) (2010). *Blowing Up the Brand. Critical Perspectives on Promotional Culture*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Awan, I. (2016). Islamophobia on Social Media. A Qualitative Analysis of the Facebook's Walls of Hate. *International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, Vol 10(1), 1-20.
- Barlow, J. P. (1996). A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace (1996, February 8). Retrieved February 26, 2019 from <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>
- Beck, U. (2002). The Cosmopolitan Society and Its Enemies. *Theory, Culture & Society*. 19(1-2), 17-44.
- Benkler, Y. (2006). *The Wealth of Networks*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
- Bennett, W. L.; Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739-768.
- Bennett, W. L.; Pfetsch, B. (2018). Rethinking Political Communication in a Time of Disrupted Public Spheres. *Journal of Communication*, 68, 243-253.

- Berkel, B. (2006). *Konflikt als Motor Europäischer Öffentlichkeit. Eine Inhaltsanalyse von Tageszeitungen in Deutschland, Frankreich, Großbritannien und Österreich*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Biebricher, T.; Vogelmann, F. (2014). *Die Zukunft Europas zwischen Demokratie und Kapitalismus*. *PVS*, 55(1), 1-17.
- Binderkrantz, A. S.; Christiansen, P. M.; Pedersen, H. H. (2015). Interest Group Access to the Bureaucracy, Parliament, and the Media. *Governance*, 28(1), 95-112.
- Blumler, J. G.; Kavanagh, D. (1999). The Third Age of Political Communication. *Influences and Features, Political Communication*, 16(3), 209-230.
- Blumler, J. G. (2013, September 17). The Fourth Age of Political Communication. *Forscherguppe "Politische communication in der Online-Welt"*. Retrieved February 26, 2019 from <http://www.fgpk.de/en/2013/gastbeitrag-von-jay-g-blumler-the-fourth-age-of-political-communication-2/>
- Boellstorff, T.; Nardi, B.; Pearce, C.; Taylor, T. (2012). *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds. A Handbook of Method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bohdanova, T. (2014). Unexpected Revolution. The Role of Social Media in Ukraine's Euro-maidan Uprising. *European View*, 13(1), 133-142.
- Boston, P. (2015). Positioning theory and narratives in the organization. teaching MSc students to apply theory to practice. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 37, 134-139.
- Börzel, T. A.; Risse, T. (2009). Revisiting the Nature of the Beast – Politicization, European Identity, and Postfunctionalism. A Comment on Hooghe and Marks. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), 217-220.
- Brinkmann, S. (2010). Guilt in a Fluid Culture? A View from Positioning Theory. *Culture & Psychology*, 16(2), 253-266.
- Brinkmann, S. (2013). *Qualitative Interviewing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brinkmann, S. (2017). *Philosophies of Qualitative Research*. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online.
- Brüggemann, M.; Kleinen-von-Königslöw, K. (2009). 'Let's Talk about Europe'. Why Europeanization Shows a Different Face in Different Newspapers. *European Journal of Communication*, 24, 27-48.
- Brüggemann, M.; Hepp, A.; Kleinen-von-Königslöw, K.; Wessler, H. (2009). Transnationale Öffentlichkeit in Europa. Forschung und Perspektiven. *Publizistik*, 54, 391-414.
- Bryman, A. (2008). Of methods and methodology. Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management. *An International Journal*, 3(2), 159-168.

- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods (4. ed)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bryman, A.; Buchanan, D. A. (Eds.) (2018). *Unconventional Methodology in Organization and Management Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bucher, T. (2012). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *new media & society*, 14(7), 1164–1180.
- Calhoun, C. (1992). *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Castells, M. (2000). *The rise of the network society*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Castells, M. (2010). *The rise of the network society (2. ed.)*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Christensen, T.; Lægreid, P.; Roness, P. G.; Røvik, K. A. (2007). *Organization Theory and the Public Sector. Instrumt, culture and myth*. New York: Routledge.
- Constantino, T. E. (2008). Constructivism. In Given, L. M. (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Quantitative Research Methods (Vol. 1&2)* (pp. 116-119). London: SAGE.
- Croeser, S.; Highfield, T. (2014). Occupy Oakland and #oo. Uses of Twitter within the Occupy movement. *First Monday*, 19(3), 1-14.
- Dahlberg, L. (2013). Exclusions of the Public Sphere Conception. Examining Deliberative and Discourse Theory Accounts. *Javnost - The Public*, 20(1), 21-38.
- Dennen, V. P. (2011). Facilitator presence and identity in online discourse. use of positioning theory as an analytic framework. *Instr Sci*, 39, 527-541.
- Dahlgren, P. (2018). Media, Knowledge and Trust. The Deepening Epistemic Crisis of Democracy. *Javnost - The Public*, 25(1-2), 20-27.
- Davies, B.; Harré, R. (1990). Positioning. The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1), 43-63.
- Davies, H. C. (2018). Redefining Filter Bubbles as (Escapable) Socio-Technical Recursion. *Sociological Research Online*, 23(3), 637–654.
- Davis, A. (2013). *Promotional Cultures. The Rise and Spread of Advertising, Public Relations, Marketing and Branding*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- De Vreese, C. H. (2003). *Framing Europe. Television news and European integration*. Amsterdam: Aksant.
- Diamond, L. (2010). Liberation Technology. *Journal of Democracy*, 21(3), 69-83.
- Drost, E. A. (2011). Validity and Reliability in Social Science Research. *Education Research and Perspectives*, 38(1), 105-123.



- Eder, K.; Kantner, C. (2000). Transnationale Resonanzstrukturen in Europa. Eine Kritik der Rede vom Öffentlichkeitsdefizit. In Bach, M. (Ed.), *Die Europäisierung nationaler Gesellschaften* (pp. 306–331). Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Eilders, C.; Voltmer, K. (2003). Zwischen Deutschland und Europa. Eine empirische Untersuchung zum Grad von Europäisierung und Europaunterstützung der meinungsführenden deutschen Tageszeitungen. *Medien- & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 51(2), 250-270.
- Engesser, S.; Ernst, N.; Esser, F.; Büchel, F. (2017). Populism and social media. how politicians spread a fragmented ideology. *Information, Communication and Society*, 20(8), 1109-1126.
- Etikan, I.; Sulaiman, M.; Abubakar, A.; Rukayya S. (2016). Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1-4.
- European Parliament. Fact Sheets on the European Union. Communication Policy, 2018 October. Retrieved February 26, 2019 from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU\\_3.6.8.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU_3.6.8.pdf)
- Ferree, M.; Gamson, W.; Gerhards, J.; Rucht, D. (2002). Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies. *Theory and Society*, 31(3), 289-324.
- Fisher, E. (2012). How Less Alienation Creates More Exploitation? Audience Labour on Social Network Sites. *tripleC*, 10(2), 171-183.
- Gattermann, K. (2013): News about the European Parliament: Patterns and external drivers of broadsheet coverage. *European Union Politics*, 14(3), 436-457.
- Gaxie, D. (2011). Forschungsbefunde und Forschungslücken. Die Grundeinstellungen der Bürger zu "Europa". In Gaxie, D.; Hubé, N.; Lassalle, M. de; Rowell, J. (Eds.) (2011), *Das Europa der Europäer. Über die Wahrnehmung eines politischen Raums* (F. Weigand, M. Merz, Trans.) (pp. 13-35). Bielefeld: transcript.
- Gerhards, J. (1998). Öffentlichkeit. In Jarren, O.; Sarcinelli, U.; Saxer, U. (Eds.), *Politische Kommunikation in der demokratischen Gesellschaft* (pp. 694-695). Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Gerhards, J. (2000). Europäisierung von Ökonomie und Politik und die Trägheit der Entstehung einer europäischen Öffentlichkeit. In Bach, M. (Ed.), *Die Europäisierung nationaler Gesellschaften* (pp. 277–305). Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Gerring, J. (2011). The Case Study. What it is and What it Does. In Goodin, Robert E. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science* (pp. 90-122). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gibson, R.; Cantijoch, M. (2013). Conceptualizing and measuring participation in the age of the internet Is online political engagement really different to offline? *Journal of Politics*, 75(3), 701-716.

- Given, L. M. (Ed.) (2008). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Quantitative Research Methods (Vol. 1&2)*. London: SAGE.
- Grill, C.; Boomgaarden, H. (2017). A network perspective on mediated Europeanized public spheres. Assessing the degree of Europeanized media coverage in light of the 2014 European Parliament election. *European journal of communication. European Journal of Communication*, 32(6), 568-582.
- Habermas, J. (1991). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Hammersley, M., & Traianou, A. (2012). *Ethics in qualitative research. Controversies and contexts*. London: SAGE.
- Harré, R.; van Langenhove, L. (1991). Varieties of Positioning. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 21(4), 393-407.
- Harré, R.; Moghaddam, F. (2003). *The Self and Others. Positioning Individuals and Groups in Personal, Political, and Cultural Contexts*. Westport: Praeger.
- Hennen, L. (2016). The European public sphere and the internet In Lindner, R.; Aichholzer G.; Hennen, L., *Electronic Democracy in Europe. Prospects and Challenges of E-Publics, E-Participation and E-Voting* (pp. 21-51). Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Hepp, A.; Brüggemann, M.; Kleinen-von-Königslöw, K.; Lingenberg, S.; Möller, J. (2012). *Politische Diskurskulturen in Europa. Die Mehrfachsegmentierung europäischer Öffentlichkeit*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Hess, D. (2015). Power, Ideology, and Technological Determinism. *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, 1, 121-125.
- Hoffmann, A. L.; Proferes, N.; Zimmer, M. (2018). "Making the world more open and connected": Mark Zuckerberg and the discursive construction of Facebook and its users. *New media & Society*, 20(1), 199-218.
- Hooghe, L.; Marks, G. (2009). A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration. From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), 1-23.
- Hopf, T. (1998). The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory. *International Security*, 23(1), 171-200.
- Ivic, S. (2017). The concept of a European public sphere within European public discourse. *Etikk i Praksis*, 11(2), 79-94.
- Jakubowicz, A. (2018). Algorithms of hate. How the Internet facilitates the spread of racism and how public policy might help stem the impact. *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, 151(1), 69-81.

- James, M. (2011). A provisional conceptual framework for intentional positioning in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 23(1), 93-118.
- Jeffares, S. (2014). *Interpreting Hashtag Politics. Policy Ideas in an Era of Social Media*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jenkins H.; Carpentier, N. (2013). Theorizing participatory intensities. A conversation about participation and politics. *The International Journal of Research into New Media*, 19(3), 265-286.
- Jouhki, J.; Lauk, E., Penttinen, M.; Sormanen, N.; Uskali, T. (2016). Facebook's Emotional Contagion Experiment as a Challenge to Research Ethics. *Media and Communication*, 4(4), 75-85.
- Just, S. N. (2010): There Can Be No EU without the Support of the Citizens": Debate and Dialogue on the Debate Europe Website. In Nesti, G.; Valentini, C. (Eds.), *Public Communication in the European Union: History, Perspectives and Challenges* (pp. 293-316). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Karppinen, K. (2009). European Public Spheres and the Challenge of Radical Pluralism. In Salovaara-Moring, I. (Ed.), *Manufacturing Europe. Spaces of Democracy, Diversity and Communication* (pp. 53-68). Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Karppinen, K.; Hallvard M. (2012). What We Talk About When We Talk About Document Analysis. In Puppis, M.; Just, N. (Eds.), *Trends in Communication Policy Research. New Theories, Methods and Subjects* (Ch. 10). Intellect Books.
- Karppinen, K. (2013). Uses of democratic theory in media and communication studies. *Observatorio Journal*, 7(3), 1-17.
- Knobloch-Westerwick, S.; Johnson, B. K. (2014). *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19(2), 171-184.
- Knops, A. (2016). Deliberative networks. *Critical Policy Studies*, 10(3), 305-324.
- Koopmans, R. (2007). Who Inhabits the European Public Sphere? Winners and Losers, Supporters and Opponents in Europeanised Political Debates. *European Journal of Political Research* 46, 183-210.
- Koopmans, R.; Erbe, J. (2004). Toward a European Public Sphere? Vertical and horizontal dimensions of Europeanized political communication. *Innovation*, 17(2), 97-118.
- Koskinen, K. (2013). Social media and the institutional illusions of EU communication. *International Journal for Applied Linguistics*. 23(1), 80-92.
- Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews. The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*. London: SAGE.
- Laffan, B. (2004). The European Union and Its Institutions as "Identity Builders". In Herrmann,

- R.; Risse, T.; Marilynn, B. B. (Eds.), *Transnational Identities. Becoming European in the EU* (pp. 75-96). Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Larsson, A. O. (2016). Online, all the time? A quantitative assessment of the permanent campaign on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 18(2), 274-292.
- Laursen, B.; Valentini, C. (2014). Mediatization and Government Communication. Press Work in the European Parliament. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol 20(1), 1-19.
- Leitch, S.; Motion, J. (2010). Publics and Public Relations. Effecting Change. In Heath, R. (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. 99-110). Thousand Oaks, CA. SAGE.
- Lichtenstein, D; Eilders, C. (2018): Lost in uncertainty: How the Euro crisis affected European identity constructions in national media discourses. *The International Communication Gazette*, 81(8), 1-21.
- Lilleker, D. G.; Malagón, C. (2010). Levels of Interactivity in the 2007 French Presidential Candidates' Websites. *European Journal of Communication*, 25(1), 25-42.
- Lilleker, D. G.; Koc-Michalska, K.; Schweitzer, E. J.; Jacunski, M.; Marwick, A.; Boyd, D. (2011). "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately. Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience." *New Media and Society*, 13(1), 114-133.
- Lilleker, D. G.; Koc-Michalska, K. (2017). What Drives Political Participation? Motivations and Mobilization in a Digital Age. *Political Communication*, 34(1), 21-43.
- Lysenco, V.; Desouza, K. (2010, September 6). Role of Internet-based information flows and technologies in electoral revolutions. The case of Ukraine's Orange Revolution. *First Monday*, 15(9). Retrieved November 29, 2018 from <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2992/2599>
- Mabry, L. (2008). Case Study in Social Research In Alasuutari, Pertti; Bickman, Leonard; Brannen, Julia, *The SAGE Handbook of Social Research Methods* (pp. 214-227). London: SAGE.
- Martins, A. I.; Lecheler, S.; De Vreese, C. H. (2012). Information Flow and Communication Deficit: Perceptions of Brussels-Based Correspondents and EU Officials. *Journal of European Integration*, 34(4), 305-322.
- Marwick, A.; Boyd, D. (2011). I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately. Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience. *New Media and Society*, 13(1), 114-133.
- McLuhan, M. (1962). *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media*. New York: Routledge.
- McNair, B. (1995). *An Introduction to Political Communication*. New York: Routledge.

- Meriläinen, N.; Vos, M. (2010). Can online communication strengthen the relationship of EU with young citizens in Finland? In Valentini, C.; Nesti, G. (Eds.), *Public Communication in the European Union. History, Perspectives and Challenges* (pp. 317-334). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing.
- Meyer, C. (1999). Political Legitimacy and the Invisibility of Politics. Exploring the European Union's Communication Deficit. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 37(4), 617-639.
- Meyer, C. (2009). Does European Union politics become mediatized? The case of the European Commission, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(7), 1047-1064.
- Michailidou, A. (2007). Europeanisation of the electronic public sphere. Theory, institutional culture and online reality. *Political Perspectives*, 2(4), 1-38.
- Michailidou, A. (2010). Vertical Europeanisation of online public dialogue. EU public communication policy and online implementation. In Bee, C.; Bozzini, E. (Eds.), *Mapping the European Public Sphere. institutions, media and civil society* (pp. 65-82). Ashgate Publishers.
- Miller, D. (2013). The Morality Play. Getting to the Heart of Media Influence on Foreign Policy. In Hamilton, J.; Lawrence R. (Eds.), *Foreign Correspondence* (pp. 89-104). London: Routledge.
- Moghaddam, F. M.; Harre, R. (2010). *Words of conflict, words of war. How the language we use in political processes sparks fighting*. Westport: Praeger.
- Moravcsik, A. (2004). Is there a 'Democratic Deficit' in World Politics? A Framework for Analysis. *Government and Opposition*, 39(2), 336-363.
- Morozov, E. (2011, March 2). The internet is a tyrant's friend. *NewScientist*. Retrieved February 26, 2019 from. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20928026-100-the-internet-is-a-tyrants-friend/>
- Mouffe, C. (2000). *Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism*. (Reihe Politikwissenschaft, /Institut für Höhere Studien, Abt. Politikwissenschaft, 72). Vienna: Institut für Höhere Studien.
- Mourao, R. R.; Yoo, J.; Geise, S.; Araiza, J. A.; Kilgo, D. K.; Chen, V. Y.; Johnson, T. J. (2015). Online News, Social Media, and European Union Attitudes: A Multidimensional Analysis. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 3199-3222.
- Müller, M.; Reckling, T.; Weiß, A. (2014). Introduction. Communicating European Integration - A Historical Perspective. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, University Association for Contemporary European Studies, 10(1), 4-11.
- Narayanan, V.; Howard, P. N.; Kollanyi, B.; Elswah, M. (2017). Russian Involvement and Junk News during Brexit. COMPROP DATA MEMO 2017.10.

- Neidhardt, F. (2010). Funktionen politischer Öffentlichkeit. *Forschungsjournal NSB*, 23(3), 26–34.
- Neidhardt, F. (Ed.) (1994). *Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meinung, soziale Bewegungen*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Nielson, R. K.; Vaccari, C. (2013). Do People “Like” Politicians on Facebook? Not really. Large-Scale Direct Candidate-to-Voter Online Communication as an Outlier Phenomenon. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2333–2356.
- Nieminen, H. (2006). What do we mean by a European Public Sphere? In Carpentier, N.; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, P.; Nordenstreng, K.; Hartmann, M.; Vihalemm, P.; Cammaerts, B. (Eds.), *Researching Media, Democracy and Participation* (105–119). Tartu: Tartu University Press.
- Nieminen, H. (2008). Europe of Networks or the European Public Sphere? Four plus One Approaches. *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmai*, 3(23), 10–27.
- O’Shaughnessy, N. J.; Baines, P. R. (2009). Selling terror. The symbolization and positioning of Jihad. *Marketing Theory*, 9(2), 227–241.
- Nieminen, H. (2009). The European Public Sphere as a Network? Four Plus One Approaches. In Salovaara-Moring, I. (Ed.), *Manufacturing Europe. Spaces of Democracy, Diversity and Communication* (pp. 19–34). Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Pariser, E. (2011). *The Filter Bubble. What the Internet is Hiding from You*. London: Penguin.
- Paulus, T.; Lester, J. N.; Dempster, P. (2014). *Digital Tools for Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE.
- Persily, N. (2017). The 2016 U.S. Election. Can Democracy Survive the Internet? *Journal of Democracy*, 28(2), 63–76.
- Peters, B. (1994). On reconstructive legal and political theory. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 20 (4), 101–134.
- Peters, S. (2010). Strategic Communication for Crisis Management. Operations of International Organisations. ISAF Afghanistan and EULEX Kosovo. *EU Diplomacy Papers (1)*.
- Pfetsch, B.; Löblich, M.; Eilders, C. (2018). Dissonant public spheres—a new perspective in communication theory. *Publizistik*, 63(4), 477–495.
- Price, M. (2012). Narratives of Legitimacy. *Tripodos* (30), 9–28.
- Postill, J. (2018). Populism and social media. A global perspective. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(5), 754–765.

- Rader E.; Gray R. (2015). Understanding user beliefs about algorithmic curation in the Facebook news feed. In Begole B., Kim J. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Seoul, Republic of Korea, 18–23 April 2015* (pp.173–182). New York. ACM.
- Rane, H.; Salem, S. (2012). Social media, social movements and the diffusion of ideas in the Arab uprisings, *The Journal of International Communication*, 18(1), 97-111.
- Rasmussen, T. (2013): Internet-based media, Europe and the political public sphere. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(1), 97-104.
- Rheingold, H. (1994). *Virtuelle Gemeinschaft*. Bonn: Addison Wesley.
- Rhomberg, M. (2013). Die Europäische Union als "imagined community"? In Filzmaier, P.; Plaikner, P.; Hainzl, C.; Ingruber, D.; Duffek, K. A. (Eds.), *Wir sind EUropa. Von vielen EU-Öffentlichkeiten zu einer europäischen Öffentlichkeit*, (ed. netPOL - Politische Kommunikation, 4) (pp. 19-25). Vienna: Facultas.
- Rieder, B.; Abdulla, R.; Poell, T.; Woltering, R.; Zack, L. (2015). Data critique and analytical opportunities for very large Facebook Pages. Lessons learned from exploring “We are all Khaled Said”. *Big Data & Society*, 2(2), 1-23.
- Ritchie, J.; Lewis, J.; McNaughton N.; Ormston, R. (Eds.) (2003). *Qualitative Research Practice. A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Salovaara-Moring, I. (2009). Manufacturing Europe, Restoring Communication? In Salovaara-Moring, I. (Ed.), *Manufacturing Europe. Spaces of Democracy, Diversity and Communication* (pp. 9-18). Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Saurwein, F. (2006). *Europäisierung der österreichischen Öffentlichkeit. Mediale Aufmerksamkeit für EU-Politik und der veröffentlichte Diskurs über die EU-Erweiterung*. Vienna: Institut für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft.
- Scherer, H.; Vesper, S. (2004). Was schreiben die anderen? Ausländische Pressestimmen als Vorform paneuropäischer Öffentlichkeit. Eine Inhaltsanalyse deutscher Qualitätszeitungen. In Hagen, L. M. (Ed.), *Europäische Union und mediale Öffentlichkeit. Theoretische Perspektiven und empirische Befunde zur Rolle der Medien im europäischen Einigungsprozess* (pp. 195–211). Cologne. Herbert von Halem Verlag.
- Schmidt, V. A. (2012). Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union. *Political Studies*, 61(1), 2-22.
- Schuck, A. R. T.; Xezonakis, G.; Elenbaas, M.; Banducci, S. A; de Vreese, C. H. (2010). Party contestation and Europe on the news agenda: The 2009 European Parliamentary Elections. *Electoral Studies*, 30, 41-52.
- Schulz, W. (1997). *Politische Kommunikation*. Wiesbaden: Springer.

- Serazio, M. (2013). *Your Ad Here. The Cool Sell of Guerilla Marketing*. New York: New York University Press.
- Shirky, C. (2008). *Here comes Everybody. The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Silva, L.; Mondal, M.; Correa, D.; Benevenuto, F.; Weber, I. (2016). Analyzing the Targets of Hate in Online Social Media. Proceedings of the Tenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM 2016).
- Silverman, C. (2016, November 16). This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook. *BuzzFeed News*. Retrieved October 17, 2018 from <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook>
- Slocum, N.; van Langenhove, L. (2003). Integration Speak. Introducing Positioning Theory in Regional Integration Studies. In Harré, R.; Moghaddam, F. (Eds.), *The self and others. Positioning individuals and groups in personal, political, and cultural contexts* (pp. 219-234). Westport: Praeger.
- Slocum-Bradley, N. (2008). *Promoting Conflict Or Peace Through Identity*. Bonn: Ashgate Publishing.
- Spohr, C. (2017). Fake news and ideological polarization. Filter bubbles and selective exposure on social media. *Business Information Review*, 34(3), 150–160.
- Standard Eurobarometer 90 (November, 2018): First results. Public opinion in the European Union. Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication.
- Stie, A. E. (2013): Legislative politics in the EU – also a matter of democracy? Conference Paper. Retrieved December 18, 2018 from <https://www.uio.no/english/research/interfaculty-research-areas/democracy/news-and-events/events/conferences/2013/Programme/democraticlegislatorsolp.pdf>
- Strömbäck, K.; Kiouisis, S. (Eds.) (2011). *Political Public Relations. Principles and Applications*. New York: Routledge.
- Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 571-610.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *#Republic. Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Taplin, J. (2017). *Move fast and break things. How Facebook, Google, and Amazon Cornered Culture and Undermined Democracy*. New York: Little Brown and Company.
- Tapscott, D.; William, W. (2006). *Wikinomics. How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*. New York: Penguin Group.



- Tenscher, J.; Koc-Michalska, K.; Lilleker, D. G.; Mykkänen, J.; Walter, A. S.; Findor, A.; Jalali, C.; Róka, J. (2016). The professionals speak. Practitioners' perspectives on professional election campaigning. *European Journal of Communication*, 31(2), 95-119.
- Tirado, F.; Gálvez, A. (2007). Positioning Theory and Discourse Analysis. Some Tools for Social Interaction Analysis. *Historical Social Research*, 33(1), 224-251.
- Tomkova, J. (2010). Towards a "direct dialogue"? Evaluation of (e)public consultations in the EU context. In Valentini, C.; Nesti G. (Eds.), *Public communication in the European Union. History, perspectives and challenges* (pp. 269-292). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Trenz, H. (2004). Media Coverage on European Governance. Exploring the European Public Sphere in National Quality Newspapers. *European Journal of Communication*, 19(3), 291–319.
- Trenz, H. (2009). Uniting and Dividing. The European Public Sphere as an Unfinished Project. In. Salovaara-Moring, I. (Ed.). *Manufacturing Europe. Spaces of Democracy, Diversity and Communication* (pp. 35-52). Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Valentini, C. (2006). Manufacturing EU Consensus. The Reasons behind EU Promotional Campaigns. *GMJ (Mediterranean Edition)*, 1(2), 80-96.
- Valentini, C. (2008). *Promoting the European Union. Comparative Analysis of EU Communication Strategies in Finland and in Italy*. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä University Printing House.
- Valentini, C. (2013). Political Public Relations in the European Union. EU Reputation and Relationship Management Under Scrutiny. *Public Relations Journal*, 7(4), 1-22.
- van Dijk, J.A.G.M. (2013). Inequalities in the Network Society. In Orton-Johnson K., Prior N. (Eds.) *Digital Sociology* (pp. 105-124). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- van Dijck, J. (2013). *Culture of Connectivity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Langenhove, L.; James, M. (2017). The practice of Science Diplomacy studied from the Positioning Theory angle. 3rd international Conference on Public Policy, Singapore, 28th June to Friday 30th June 2017.
- Vatnøy, E. (2016). Rejuvenating the public sphere – The rhetorical arenas of social media. In Kramp, L.; Carpentier, N.; Hepp, A.; Kilborn, R.; Kunelius, R.; Nieminen H.; Olsson, T.; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, P.; Tomanić Trivundža, I. ; Tosoni, S. (Eds.). *Politics, Civil Society and Participation. Media and Communications in a Transforming Environment* (pp. 121-131). Bremen. edition lumière.
- Vesnic-Alujevic, L. (2012a). Political Communication on Facebook. A Case Study of the European Parliament Profile Page for the Elections 2009. *Communication and Media*, 7(22), 35-53.

- Vesnic-Alujevic, L. (2012b). Political participation and web 2.0 in Europe. A case study of Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 38(3), 466-470.
- Vesnic-Alujevic, L.; Nacarino, R. C. (2012). The EU and Its Democratic Deficit. Problems and (Possible) Solutions. *European View*, 11(1), 63-70.
- Vesnic-Alujevic, L. (2016a). (Not) talking about politics on Facebook. The case of Croatian young adults. *International Journal of Electronic Governance*, 8(4), 381-400.
- Vesnic-Alujevic, L. (2016b). European elections and Facebook. Political advertising and de-liberation? In Dezelan, T.; Vobic, I., *(R)evolutionizing Political Communication through Social Media* (pp. 191-209). Hershey, Pennsylvania: IGI Global.
- Villi, M.; Matikainen, J. (2016). Participation in Social Media. Studying Explicit and Implicit Forms of Participation in Communicative Social Networks. *Media and Communication*, 4(4), 109-117.
- Walter, S. (2017). Three Models of the European Public Sphere. An analysis of the actor structure in EU news. *Journalism Studies*, 18(6), 749-770.
- Wessler, H. (2007). Politische Öffentlichkeit jenseits des Nationalstaats? In Otfried, J.; Lachenmeier, D.; Steiner, A. (Eds.), *Entgrenzte Demokratie? Herausforderungen für die politische Interessenvermittlung* (pp. 49-71). Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Weidenfeld, W.; Wessels, W. (2009). *Europa von A bis Z. Taschenbuch der europäischen Integration* (11. ed.). Berlin: Institut für europäische Politik.
- Weizman, E. (2008). *Positioning in Media Dialogue. Negotiating Roles in the News Interview*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Williams, C. B.; Gulati, G. J. (2012): Social networks in political campaigns: Facebook and the congressional elections of 2006 and 2008. *New Media Society* 0(0), 1-20.
- Williams, C. B.; Newman, B. I. (2013). *Political Marketing in Retrospective and Prospective*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Winkler, R.; Kozeluh, U.; Brandstetter, H. (2006). Deliberation im europäischen Kontext. Online Debatten und Online Konsultationen auf der EU Plattform Your Voice in Europe. In Langenbucher, Wolfgang R.; Latze, M., *Europäische Öffentlichkeit und medialer Wandel* (pp. 378-400). Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Wise, D.; James, M. (2013). Positioning a Price on Carbon. Applying a Proposed Hybrid Method of Positioning Discourse Analysis for Public Relations. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 2(3), 327-53.
- Zahle, J. (2017). Privacy, Informed Consent, and Participant Observation. *Perspectives on Science*, 25(4), 465-487.

## Appendix

### **Interview questionnaire for semi-structured interviews\* with members of the EP's Web Communication unit** (*\*Order of the questions could vary*)

1. Are you okay with the interview being recorded?
2. Are you okay with your real name being used?
3. Can you tell me something about your educational and professional background and for how long you have been a member of the Facebook Team?
4. Which role does Facebook play for the communication of the European Parliament in comparison to the other social media platforms you use?
5. Can you tell me something about the audience you aim to reach with Facebook?
6. How often do you publish a Facebook post per day and why?
7. Can you tell me about the content of the posts? How is the content chosen?
8. How do you decide which articles will be published on Facebook and which, for example, are only published on Twitter?
9. Which guidelines do you follow when you compose a Facebook post, for instance, in terms of style, length, language?
10. Have you ever taken part in social media or Facebook training? What do you learn? Who are the instructors?
11. Do you regularly conduct analyses of the published posts and the reactions they get on Facebook? If yes, how does the analysis look like and how do the results influence your work?
12. How do you benefit from a high engagement on your Facebook page?
13. What do the following mean to you: "likes", "shares" and "comments"? Let us start with likes.

14. Can you tell me something about this post?

**European Parliament** hat eine Umfrage erstellt. 20. Februar um 11:12 · 🌐

🐶🐱 It's Love Your Pet Day! Are you a dog or a cat person? Vote in our poll and have a look at the EU's animal welfare policy and legislation here 🐾 <http://epfacebook.eu/animals>



I love dogs!



Cats of course!

15. Can you tell me something about this post?



16. What do you think are the major differences between the Facebook communication of, let us say, a private company and the EP as a political institution?
17. Can you tell me about your moderation policy?
18. How do you decide to which comments you reply to and to which not?
19. What happens with constructive comments? Do you monitor or forward them?
20. How do you deal with the broad Euroscepticism displayed in the comment section?
21. Do you reply to inbox messages?
22. Can you tell me about your personal attitude towards the use of social media by political actors?
23. What is your personal attitude towards the use of Facebook of the EP in particular?
24. If you would need to order the following according to the priority of your work, what do you think is the most important aspect of the official EP Facebook page: Informing the citizens, sparking a discussion amongst the citizens or establishing interaction between the citizens and the EP?
25. In your opinion, does your team use the EP Facebook page as a one-way communication channel or a two-way communication channel?
26. How do you see the relationship between Facebook and democracy?
27. Some critics say that the communication of the official EP Facebook page reaches only a small English-speaking elite. How do you think about this?
28. Another point of criticism is that the discussions in the comment sections only take place amongst people who are already strongly pro- or anti-EU while people with moderate opinions do not actively engage in online discussions. How do you think about this?
29. What role do you think will Facebook play for the EP in the future, for instance in comparison to Instagram and Twitter?
30. In which relation do you see the communication on the official EP Facebook page to the upcoming European elections?
31. You offer Facebook training to the MEPs. Can you tell me about the motivation behind this?
32. Do you have anything else you would like to share to this study?